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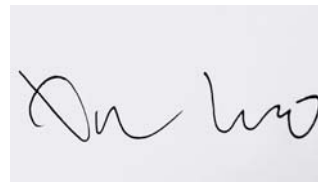
*USING WECHAT TO
EXPLORE PARENTS'
PERSPECTIVES ON
EARLY YEARS
EDUCATION IN CHINA*

Xin Luo

Declaration

I declare that this work has been composed solely by me and that it is my own work. The work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. The included publications are my own work, except where indicated throughout the thesis.

Xin Luo

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light gray background. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read 'Xin Luo'.

Abstract

Parents are increasingly making use of social media to discuss issues related to education and parenting. This phenomenon is especially true of China where parents are adopting WeChat, the leading social media app, to access educational information and discuss their views and concerns. However, very few researchers have employed social media as a means to study parents' views. As WeChat provides an unprecedented opportunity to gain insights into parents' perspectives, the aim of this study was to investigate the ways in which its use revealed: i) parents' views on, and aspirations for, their children's early years education and ii) how they perceived their roles in fulfilling these educational aspirations.

To achieve the aims, I employed an innovative combination of methodologies including a four-month virtual ethnography of one WeChat parent group comprising over 400 participants and in-depth audio call interviews with eight members of the group. Parents' online activities and transcriptions of audio interviews were analysed with the help of WeChat's search function and by drawing on concepts including concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2011) and Chinese parents' 'educational desire' (Kipnis, 2011).

The study found that *ke wai ban* (out-of-school classes) were one of the major ways for parents to be involved in their children's early years education against a backdrop of China's transitional era in which the country aimed to become a world innovation hub and economic powerhouse. Parents engaged in *ke wai ban* to enhance their children's academic competitiveness and cultivate their *suzhi* (human quality). Parents' educational aspirations were further reflected in their management of, and preparation for, a series of tests that would take place years into the future.

The study contributes insights into the ways that parents conceptualised early years education not as a separate learning stage but as part of a long-term educational project in which early academic learning was complementary to the cultivation of children's neoliberal values. The study illustrates how parents realised the dilemma and tensions and how they negotiated and theorised their conflicting educational orientations, selecting certain aspects of education in Western countries to manufacture a version which could be used to justify their views and aspirations for Chinese early years education. Parents used this process to fulfil their responsibility to prepare for their children's uncertain future in a time of change. Methodologically, this study demonstrates how social media, specifically WeChat, could be a venue for ethnographic study on education.

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Contents

Figures and Tables	VII
Glossary.....	VIII
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 A ‘new era’ for Chinese parents?.....	1
1.2 Getting to know the Little MBA group.....	2
1.3 ‘Everyone is running. I will have to run, too’ – what the WeChat group is about	5
1.4 Defining the research.....	9
1.4.1 EYE development in China	11
1.4.2 The role of parents in early years education	13
1.4.3 WeChat and the parents’ group	15
1.5 Aims and research questions	19
1.6 Outline of the thesis.....	20
1.7 Conclusion.....	22
Chapter 2: The context.....	23
2.1 <i>Mengxue</i> and <i>keju</i> : a historical perspective of Chinese education	23
2.1.1 <i>Mengxue</i> : a historical form of Chinese EYE	23
2.1.2 <i>Keju</i> : the imperial exams.....	25
2.2 The development of modern early years education in China – a policy perspective	29
2.3 <i>Xiao sheng chu</i> , <i>zhongkao</i> and <i>gaokao</i> – exams in Chinese education.....	32
2.3.1 <i>Xiao sheng chu</i>	33
2.3.2 <i>Zhongkao</i>	33
2.3.3 <i>Gaokao</i>	34
2.4 The influence of social media on EYE – a technological perspective	35
2.5 Conclusion.....	38
Chapter 3: Literature review.....	39
3.1 Introduction	39
3.2 Parental involvement in early years education	40
3.3 Conceptualising parents’ endeavours	43
3.3.1 <i>Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China’s One-Child Policy</i>	44
3.3.2 <i>Love’s Uncertainty: The Politics and Ethics of Child Rearing in Contemporary China</i>	46
3.3.3 <i>Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China</i>	48
3.3.4 <i>Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life</i>	49
3.4 Educational market, out-of-school classes, parents’ choices and anxieties	51
3.5 <i>Suzhi</i> and Chinese early years education.....	56

3.5.1 <i>Suzhi</i> in Chinese EYE.....	56
3.5.2 <i>Suzhi</i> and Confucianism	58
3.5.3 Contradictions and dilemmas: the success and failure of <i>suzhi</i>	60
3.6 Social media, WeChat and parenting	62
3.7 Conclusion.....	64
Chapter 4: Methodology.....	66
4.1 Introduction	66
4.2 Overall design: intra-sited ethnography in WeChat	67
4.3 Why ethnography?	68
4.4 Doing ethnography in social media	71
4.5 Re-conceptualisation of sites, multi-presence and ‘imaginative engagement’	74
4.6 Re-conceptualisation of participation	81
4.7 Re-conceptualisation of private and public space: individualised privacy	83
4.8 Conclusion.....	85
Chapter 5: Research methods.....	86
5.1 Introduction	86
5.2 Research procedures	86
5.2.1 Sampling.....	86
5.2.2 Data collection	92
5.2.3 Data transcriptions, translation and analysis	96
5.3 Constraints of ethnography in social media	103
5.4 Ethics discussion	104
5.5 Conclusion.....	108
Chapter 6: <i>Ke wai ban</i> : parents’ educational strategies out of school	109
6.1 Introduction	109
6.2 What is <i>ke wai ban</i> ?.....	111
6.3 The relationship between <i>ke wai ban</i> and schooling	112
6.4 <i>Ke wai ban</i> and parents with different socioeconomic resources	117
6.4.1 Fena’s story of <i>ke wai ban</i>	118
6.4.2 Luli’s story of <i>ke wai ban</i>	121
6.5 <i>ke wai ban</i> and concerted cultivation.....	125
6.6 Resistance of <i>ke wai ban</i>	130
6.7 Conclusion.....	132
Chapter 7: Managing the educational project: preparing academic learning from the early years	134
7.1 Introduction	134

7.2 'There have been so many early starters out there': preparing <i>gaokao</i> from toddlerhood	135
7.3 One exam leads to another: managing the continuous pressure	142
7.4 'Competing in <i>gaokao</i> is at least something we can afford': exams as equal opportunities	147
7.5 Managing the educational dilemma in the early years	150
7.6 Conclusion	155
Chapter 8: Western education for Chinese parents: learning from the West	158
8.1 Different constructs of Western education in the WeChat group	159
8.1.1 Educating Chinese children in the West: the advantages of Western education	160
8.1.2 'The miracle can only happen in China!' – Divisive Western education	165
8.1.3 Incorporating Western education into Chinese soil	166
8.1.4 Producing Western education in China	168
8.2 Posts on Western education in WeChat	171
8.3 Why does Western education matter to the parents?	182
8.4 Conclusion	186
Chapter 9: Conclusion	187
9.1 A brief summary of the chapters	188
9.2 Contribution to knowledge	192
9.3 Reflection: The role of WeChat in the current research	195
9.4 Problematising WeChat	197
9.5 Review of the contexts: a timely look at Chinese parents in the 'new era'	198
9.6 Reflection on personal influence	200
9.7 Some limitations	202
9.8 Implications for policy, practice and further research	204
9.8.1 Implications for further research	204
9.8.2 Implications for practice	205
9.8.3 Implications for policy	206
9.9 The end and the beginning: the story continues	206
References	210
Appendix A: Core interview questions	221
Appendix B: Research consent forms for interview participants	223
Appendix C: Examples of The WeChat posts on America and British education	225
WeChat posts on American Education	225
WeChat posts on British Education	228
Appendix D: Publication and presentations related to this thesis	232

Peer reviewed publication	232
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Figures and Tables

Figure 1.1 Functions of WeChat.....	17
Figure 1.2 Sources of information.....	17
Figure 4.1 Being at multiple sites.....	76
Figure 4.2 A selection of functions enabled by WeChat.....	79
Figure 4.3 Users personalise their privacy options.....	80
Figure 4.4 Parent's WeChat posts with educational components.....	80
Figure 4.5 Clicking likes.....	82
Figure 4.6 Personalising privacy.....	84
Figure 5.1 Searching information.....	99
Figure 5.2 The comments on the meta-themes by my supervisor.....	102
Figure 5.3 Mobile phone screenshot of the document in WeChat.....	102
Table 5.1 the demographic information of the interviewees.....	91
Table 5.2 An illustration of an analysis of the code of <i>ke wai ban</i>	99
Table 6.1 Types of <i>ke wai ban</i>	112

Glossary

Fuyang/qiongyang (富养 / 穷养): *Fuyang* is translated as ‘cultivation with abundance’, while *qiongyang* means the opposite, translated as ‘cultivation with deprivation’;

Gaokao (高考): college entrance exams taken by senior secondary school graduates;

Jianfu (减负): a buzzword in China meaning reducing the burden of students;

Keju (科举): an imperial exam held in ancient China to select government officials;

Liuliang (流量): rate of flow, which is a buzzword used to indicate the number of readers;

Mengxue (蒙学): an early years education institution where children received Confucian teachings in ancient China;

Pindie (拼爹): a buzzword in China meaning a child compete with others by the socioeconomic influence of her/his father;

Suzhi (素质): a buzzword in China that is broadly translated as human quality, including a person’s education, behaviour, morality, etc.;

Weike (微课): an online class conducted on social media;

Xiao sheng chu (小升初): exams that select primary school graduates for junior secondary schools;

You sheng you yu (优生优育): a Chinese population policy meaning superior birth and superior education;

Zhongkao (中考): senior secondary school entrance exams taken by junior secondary school graduates.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 A 'new era' for Chinese parents?

On the 18th October 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping gave a final speech on the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China titled *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*. With its typical Communist language, his speech was believed to have served as more than propaganda. It succinctly summarised the national development in the past few years and set out a roadmap for the country's future (Phillips, 2017). In his speech at the Congress, President Xi Jinping (2017) said,

With decades of hard work, socialism with Chinese characteristics has crossed the threshold into a new era. ... This new era will be an era of building on past successes to further advance our cause, and of continuing in a new historical context to strive for the success of socialism with Chinese characteristics... It will be an era for all of us, the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation, to strive with one heart to realise the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation... It will be an era that sees China moving closer to centre stage and making greater contributions to humanity.

The 'new era' heralded by President Xi represented a major change for the country. In the official discourse, the 'new era' marked a number of things. Predominantly, the country had gradually established its own model of the market economy under the one-party rule and had achieved enormous economic gains and become the world's fastest-growing consumer market. The country now is determined to further its success beyond its industrial, hard power. In the 'new era', its ambition is to become the global innovation engine compelled by cultivating well-educated citizens who have a firm belief in the country's socialist system (Gracie, 2017). Studying Chinese parents' views and perspectives towards education at this particular time can shed light on how they are educating their children into becoming citizens that can help China achieve its missions. . In the early 2000s, it was parents' inflating ambition and the limited resources and opportunities that constituted the source of

parents' anxiety (Fong, 2004). In the study reported here, I ask 'How are parents today, with increasing resources at their disposal, experiencing the Chinese education of their young children?'

In the 2000s, parents' access to education, and the ways they could express their views towards education, were still mainly through popular books, newspapers and magazines, and websites (Fong, 2004). Nowadays, with the widespread use of digital mobile phones in China, social media apps have become a powerful way for parents to access educational information. Therefore, in order to find out Chinese parents' views and perspectives in the 'new era', I turned to a platform that is inhabited by a large number of Chinese parents – WeChat. I studied parents in a WeChat group called Little MBA¹.

1.2 Getting to know the Little MBA group

It was a hot summer's day in August 2014 when I first heard the name Little MBA. At a party for my reunion, Hui, one of my friends, cautiously asked me what preschools looked like in the European countries where I visited and studied. I told her about the *barnahage* I visited in Norway, the hiking trip I joined in Sweden, the city centre preschool in Dublin I volunteered at, and the crowded preschool in the Mediterranean island of Malta. In my answer, I tried to highlight the differences and characteristics of the early years education (EYE)² I had experienced. I wanted to show the different philosophies underpinning the Scandinavian practice, as well as how life circumstances could influence children's early years' experience, as I saw in Dublin city centre.

However, it seemed that Hui was not impressed and my emphasis on the differences among the various Western education practices was not clearly delivered at all. 'So the children and parents in Europe must all be worry-free', she concluded. I was a bit upset and replied in a sulk, 'They are not homogenous. Where did you learn that they are all worry-

¹ MBA is the abbreviation of Master of Business Administration. It is a degree originated in America that covers the various areas in business management. Therefore, having a group name as Little MBA indicated parents' embrace of entrepreneurial values in education.

² EYE in this research mainly covered children of four to eight years old, in both preschools and early grades of primary schools. A specific discussion of the age range of EYE will be mentioned in section 1.4 and section 5.2.1.

free?’ Hui looked to me, a bit confused, ‘Well, of course, I was told by a parent in WeChat. We are all self-educated by WeChat today. Do foreign parents use WeChat? You can have every piece of information about education with WeChat now. In our group, we have people share information who come from everywhere in the world.’

WeChat is the primary social media app in China. It enables its users to message, post, and form groups. In section 1.3.3, I will detail its functions. Hui enthusiastically showed me a few WeChat groups. As an educator and mother, Hui told me that she had participated in quite a few different groups. She invited me to join a few to learn what parents thought in China. Little MBA was one of the groups I joined. This group had over 400 parents and I could see that the discussion among the parents was lively. Plus, the name of the group suggested to me that these parents must be different. It explicitly indicated neoliberal values (see section 3.4 for an explanation of neoliberal values in China) towards education and to some extent reflected the pursuit of the nation to harbour innovativeness and entrepreneurship on the world stage. These considerations made me curious to follow the parents and find out about their pursuits in education.

Back then, I had just finished my postgraduate study in Europe and returned to the town where I was born and brought up. I had an urgent feeling that I needed to re-familiarise myself with Chinese education as soon as possible. I was aware that I needed to update my understanding of the country, a land subject to rapid and constant changes. As an educator, I had to catch up with what people thought about education. Like many returnees who had spent extended time abroad, I found my native land both familiar and strange. I still remembered the streets in my hometown and the exact location of the school where I used to work. However, I was confused as to why a Maths Olympics³ class next to the preschool could attract so many parents waiting outside on a hot afternoon for two hours. I could not help but compare these anxious parents with their counterparts I had come to know in Europe.

³ Maths Olympics is a popular subject which children in China take to be competitive in the various school selection process.

My interest, as well as confusion, about the development in EYE, was an important theme in WeChat. In the Little MBA group, parents openly discussed the pros and cons of attending a Maths Olympics class. They also included a wide range of educational topics that impressed me, including their views on the strength of Chinese education, their concerns about the current educational reform, and their praise as well as critique of education in various different countries. Even though I was previously a teacher in EYE, I rarely had access to parents who had such sustained, deep, and engaged discussions about education. Parents in the class I taught had rarely disclosed to me as much as parents in the WeChat group did. Now in this group, I began to see how parents like these, who did not previously disclose their opinions, could contribute so much to my own thoughts about EYE in China through the app on their mobile phones.

This group was a unique channel to learn about these Chinese parents' views and perspectives. As the group name indicated, it had an explicit pursuit for innovation, entrepreneurship, and practice. To achieve such goals, parents in this group had a global vision. They frequently referred to the experience in Western countries and tried to integrate it into their education values and daily practice. Parents' collective aim for these values was in line with the government's vision to upgrade industrial structures and transform the country into a global innovation hub. Compared with previous research (Fong, 2004a; Kipnis, 2011a; Kuan, 2015), this group was revealing of parents' educational views and perspectives in China's 'new era' and provided a new context for the study on Chinese parents. In the meantime, parents in this group also shared similarities with those described in the previous studies. They were ambitious but anxious, with high aspirations for their children's academic performance. Therefore, this group was both a unique and typical window to understand contemporary Chinese parents' views and perspectives on education. It became my daily routine to check what had been happening in the group discussion in Little MBA. This habit continued right through my gap year in China after my Master's study, to the beginning of my PhD life in 2015, when I decided that it was a platform which could not only satisfy my curiosity but could also provide valuable insights for my PhD study on Chinese parents. In the next section, I will provide a sample to demonstrate what the Little MBA group looks like.

1.3 'Everyone is running. I will have to run, too' – what the WeChat group is about

The discussion in the Little MBA WeChat group attracted my interest as it became a unique channel revealing parents' concerns, discontent, and anxieties, as well as their hopes and aspirations. More importantly, as a group dominated by parents, the interaction, discussion, and support taking place among them generated a dynamic that could be found in no other place. It was the tension between parents' pursuit of EYE and the current Chinese early years provisions that began to catch my attention. In the following part of the chapter, I will present a snapshot of parents' activities in Little MBA to demonstrate a typical day in the group. From there, I will provide the policy and cultural contexts of Little MBA, before I move on to state the purpose of the study and define the research area.

Since I joined the Little MBA group, checking the parents' discussions and conversations had become a daily routine for me and the other participants. On the morning of a typical working day in the winter of 2015, as with most days, many Chinese parents in the WeChat group had just begun their work. These parents mainly came from different locations in China, and most of them had never met each other in person. Due to their common interests and pursuits of enhancing their children's wellbeing, educational attainment, and creativity, they formed the virtual space group named Little MBA in WeChat.

Typically, there would be sporadic conversations taking place on any given morning. They would talk about the 'big news' taking place around the globe, stories which were not necessarily related to education. It could be about a celebrity who was just found to have had an affair, or about a national program to tackle poverty in a particular locality. Some topic threads were followed and exchanged for a while among a few group members. Many more were interrupted and left unfollowed. One morning, Nuonuo forwarded a screenshot of her friend's WeChat post, expressing that her daughter had to attend many *ke wai ban* (out-of-school classes) to enhance academic attainment, worrying that it was too much extra work for the children.

Nuonuo was asking the other parents' views towards the various *ke wai ban* provisions. She expressed her concern and was curiously asking for the other parents' views. It was a topic that instantaneously attracted many parents' attention and quickly engaged many parents in a sustained conversation.

Emma:

I once read an article written by a mom saying that the out-of-school classes provided by the training institutions are really good and children enjoy them a lot. This is different from what we thought.

Jane:

Go and try then.

Melon:

My son likes them a lot.

Nuonuo:

@Melon, in which grade is your son? Is he learning math?

Melon:

Learn for Excellence (LfE) [a famous educational company in China specialised in academic enhancement in school subjects] has a staff team which is highly qualified. And the model of the ability-based classes ensures that each child can learn happily.

Melon:

Maths, he is in the fourth grade.

Lynn:

Many people around me have registered the classes in LfE from the second grade.

Nuonuo:

I do not have much knowledge in the out-of-school classes, especially those to enhance academic performance. Everything comes too early.

Lynn: I'm feeling very confused.

(From the WeChat group conversation 28/12/2015)

The parents' confusion about out-of-school learning classes seemed to be shared by Nuonuo. She was curious to find out what practice the other parents in the group took so

that she could make an informed decision. As their conversations continued in the group, she kept asking questions to other parents, trying to collect information about their decision-making processes and rationales relating to choices about children's out-of-school classes. Nuonuo would ask the other parents the age of their children and what subjects they would take their children to, and how many children were in the class. For parents who register their children in the Maths Olympics class, she would ask, 'Did you register your children for the sake of *xiao sheng chu*⁴ or any other reasons?'

Nuonuo was genuinely eager to learn about the other parents' choices and experiences. Regarding her own attitudes and views, on the one hand, she expressed in the group her scepticism and concerns about the early involvement of children's out-of-school academic enhancement options, feeling that it was too early for children to start and that children's time for free play could be seriously eroded. On the other hand, she tried to be pragmatic about children's education, saying in the group,

Now that we are in this environment, we have to come up with a way that can suit the reality faced by our children. We should not make them tired, and in the meantime, we should help them select the proper schools.

(From the WeChat group conversation 28/12/2015)

Her goal of EYE was to keep a balance between the competitive learning style that enhanced children's future employability, while upholding the freedom and happiness which were constituent of childhood. However, as to how to achieve that ideal and maintain the balance, just like other parents in the WeChat group, she seemed to be confused. In Chapter 6, I will explore how *ke wai ban*, the out-of-school educational services, would be used by the parents as a way to achieve both children's happiness and academic competitiveness.

⁴*Xiao sheng chu* is an exam held at the end of primary school that selects primary school graduates for junior secondary schools.

Emma was the mother who initiated the topics and took a reflective approach in the conversation. She confessed that she used to naively think that parents cultivated children's interests for their own sake, but now she thought that developing their interests was really all about best preparing for school selection exams. Reluctantly, she borrowed the old Chinese idiom to describe her helplessness, saying that 'the ideal is like a plump body, but the reality is very skinny'. For her, participation in the group was an enlightening process. The interaction with other parents informed her about how other parents had been pursuing education through extra academic tuition and how competitive the education system would continue to be – even after admission into key middle and high schools. She found the interaction with other parents in the group to have been particularly useful. The experience made her feel that she had been 'too innocent'. She realised that each major exam in her children's education career would matter.

Thinking ahead to *zhongkao* and *gaokao*, probably the most significant exams in the Chinese education system, Emma realised that even young children's performance in EYE mattered if they wanted to get into a good university and have bright career prospects later in life. As she said reluctantly, 'So when thinking about *gaokao*, I feel we should truthfully focus on improving the academic performance.' As a parent, Emma had to get her child ready at each step and any risk or failure in one academic stage could lead to a chain of failure in their education. Therefore, though Emma was overwhelmed by her children's burdens inside and outside of school, she had to follow where the parents' peer pressure led. In Chapter 5, I will explore how parents prepared for the various exams from early years onwards, and how the academic pressure shaped and defined parents' educational aspirations.

Jennifer was a pragmatic mother. On the one hand, she told other parents, 'Children are all learning in advance. A parent like me who advocates happy education will suffer.' On the other hand, she believed that hard work, Maths Olympics, and rote learning in exams were the keys to prepare children for success in the various examinations. As she said in the group, 'What is the selection standard of education? We are all clear.' This standard she referred to was children's performance in the various exams.

However, while she cooperated with the education system, she also criticised the Maths Olympics as a 'national fever' in the conversation with other parents. She seemed to be aware of the complex forces behind the popularity of Maths Olympics, saying, 'There's venture capital invested in the Maths Olympics, you guys just think about it.' Like many Chinese parents, she seemed to have very controversial and sometimes conflicting views towards education. On the one hand, she felt children in early years should be given some time to play; on the other hand, she decided to emulate the other parents and their attitudes to intense learning. As she said herself, 'Everyone is running. I will have to run, too.'

In fact, it was not only Jennifer who wanted to 'run' so that her child would not fall behind. Many parents in the group followed suit. Honey, whose child was just two years old, also decided to prepare well for the running race. Early learning classes were put on her to-do list and some children's stories were carefully selected to 'get children's ears ready'. Jiang, another mother, also felt the widely disseminated pressure, 'I had been very anxious before I joined the group, and then I became very calm. Reading the recent conversations, I am feeling uneasy again... I have to digest the information myself.' For her, the WeChat parent group brought her quite different and sometimes conflicting feelings. The access to the information used to make her feel calm and easy. However, she also felt she was pushed to run in order to keep up.

Above is an extract from the Little MBA WeChat group selected to shed light on the nature of the WeChat group. Similar conversations were taking place every day. In the following sections in the chapter, I will present the research questions and outline the main chapters of the thesis.

1.4 Defining the research

In China, EYE has been given increasing attention during recent years. At the national level, providing high-quality EYE has become one of the priorities of the nation's educational strategy, listed in the *National Middle and Long Term Education Reform and Development Plan* (2010-2020) by the Chinese State Council. At the social level, EYE has extended beyond

the field of education, being widely discussed by the public in both traditional and digital spaces.

Parents in this WeChat group experienced being torn between societal expectations and a commitment to their children's wellbeing. The dilemma the young parents were faced with reflected the bigger picture of EYE development in contemporary China. There were different pursuits, values, and orientations shaping the educational landscape in the country. By exploring parents' views, aspirations, struggles, and disorientation in the 'new era', I hope to uncover the complexities of the development of Chinese EYE and how these parents, who were essential players in the education system, were navigating the process.

Early years education (EYE) will be used in this thesis to refer to educational provisions for children in both preschool and the early grades of primary school. Although it broadly covers the education children receive from birth to eight, the main focus of this proposed research will be children aged four to eight. The first reason for the broad incorporation of age groups is that the WeChat group, a networked community which provided data for this research, naturally attracted parents whose children were in a wide age range. The discourse among these parents provided a comprehensive view of their children's education and their perceptions of the modernisation of EYE. A deliberate separation of these parents by their children's age would be artificial. Another reason is that in China, the gap between preschools and early grades in primaries is not as big as that in the Western countries⁵. A further rationale for the selection of samples will be discussed in the Methodology in Chapter 3.

In the following parts of the chapter, in order to further provide context to the current study, I will briefly introduce the development and evolution of EYE and parents' role in it. Then I will introduce WeChat and explain its essential functions. After the contextual background to the current study, I will discuss the research questions and the plan of the thesis to answer them.

⁵ The Western countries in this research mainly refer to the Anglophone countries, including the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada which were most frequently mentioned in the WeChat group.

1.4.1 EYE development in China

In order to understand the context of the research, it is necessary to have a brief look at the development of EYE in the Chinese context. In Chapter 2, a thorough description of the context of the research will be provided. Here, a historical look at EYE aims to inform readers of the specific context of this study and the necessity of researching this area at this current time.

China had been practicing EYE long before the modern education system was introduced from the West. The ancient Chinese educational institution for early years children was called *mengxue*. *Mengxue*, whose literal meaning is ‘the enlightening education’ in Chinese, was the principal institution children attended to receive Confucian teachings in ancient China (He, 1998). A detailed description of *mengxue* will be presented in Chapter 2. Its primary function was to transfer Confucian values, the pillar ideology in ancient China, as well as a system of knowledge and skills associated with it, to the youngest members of society. The practice of *mengxue* throughout its history had produced a system of pedagogy and educational aspirations that was officially endorsed by the Chinese government until the early 20th century. A hundred years after its official abolition, it is still implicitly influencing Chinese parents’ educational views and practice.

The first modern kindergarten in China was established in 1903 in Hubei Province. It followed the Japanese model, which had been heavily influenced by the Froebelian approach developed in Germany (Qi & Melhuish, 2017; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Since the 20th century, several educational philosophies have been applied to EYE in the country during different periods. From the US, it learnt from Deweyan progressive educational ideas during the 1920-1930s. Then it turned to the Soviet model after the founding of the People’s Republic of China by the Communist Party in 1949. The Chinese EYE under Communist rule emphasised collectivist values and focused on the preparation of children for future collective life and work (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). From the late 1970s, when the government decided to adopt the ‘Reform and Open Door’ policy to boost its economic and social development, education policymakers turned again to the West, especially the US, in an attempt to modernise the country and catch up with the world’s leading powers (Vaughan, 1993).

Since the late 1970s, economic reform and the door opening policy have brought many ideas into Chinese EYE and parenting practice, like marketisation, meritocracy, democracy, respect for children, emphasis on play, and children's free choices, which have been featured to various extents in the recent EYE reform. A series of EYE policies were implemented to promote the nation's modernisation agenda. These policies have, to various degrees, shifted people's educational ideas and behaviours. Specifically, Chinese EYE educators have begun to honour play, children's individual needs, and children's curiosity and creativity. The reforms aimed to prepare children for study in the later stage of education and enable them to compete with their Western counterparts in the global market economy (Qi & Melhuish, 2017; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). However, the reforms did not intend to undermine the values or morals of Chinese culture and the country's Socialist ideology. While embracing some Western education ideas, Chinese EYE was still expected to transmit the country's own values to the next generations (Pang & Richey, 2007).

Three policy documents that have been prominent in the EYE reform process have been influential during the current study. They are *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice (trial version)* issued by the National Education Commission in 1989, *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education Practice* by the Ministry of Education in 2001, and *Outline of China's National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development* by the State Council in 2010 (Zhou, 2011). In all three policy documents, EYE reformers have heavily borrowed ideas from the Western countries. Ideas like child-centeredness and play-based pedagogy have been embraced and advocated, even though in daily practice these educational values have been largely compromised to adapt to the local conditions. Most recently in 2018, the National Education Conference was held in Beijing to further develop China's education in the nation's 'new era'. At the conference, developing China's EYE was listed as the nation's top priority. The Chinese president Xi Jinping said that 'education should keep in step with China's comprehensive national strength and international status' (Cao, 2018). In his speech, the President stressed the importance of family and parents in education. He said that 'the family is the first school in life and parents are the first teachers for children. Parents should give quality first lessons for children and help them fasten the first buttons in life'. He

pledged the government agencies and society to offer support for families and parents in children's education (Ministry of Education, 2018).

The development of Chinese EYE throughout history and recent EYE policies have fully highlighted the importance of EYE in China. It should be noted, however, that even though the education reforms – which aimed to address the challenges of and changes in the contexts of EYE – have somewhat changed the way education is perceived and practiced by different stakeholders, many aspects of the education reform have not been put into practice. As important stakeholders of education, parents play essential roles in EYE. Also, cooperation between EYE institutions and parents has been encouraged and supported by the government.

1.4.2 The role of parents in early years education

Parents in China today are influenced by a mixed set of values from both China's traditional Confucianism and Western influences (Way, 2013). During the past decades, Chinese parents' parenting practices and views on EYE have undergone dramatic shifts due to the unprecedented socioeconomic changes that have taken place in Chinese society (Kuan, 2015). These changes have occurred within the context of an emerging market economy, increasing globalisation, increasing Western influence as well as Socialism systems and Confucian traditions (Fong, 2004). Confucianism, which is marked by parents' control, discipline, and high expectation on the values of education, along with Western educational values like creativity and freedom, shapes Chinese parents' views on what is 'good' parenting and education, and how 'good' parenting can contribute to 'good' education (Pang & Richey, 2007).

Demographic policies have also played a crucial role in the transformation of contemporary Chinese parenting practices and views. The One Child policy implemented in the country in the 1970s has fundamentally reshaped the structure of families in Chinese urban areas. The children growing up under the one-child policy in Chinese cities have attracted the best economic resources and parents' high aspirations, which help children become competent, confident, and ambitious learners. During recent years, the Chinese government has gradually loosened the one-child policy and allowed for families to have a second child, in a

bid to tackle the country's aging population and solve the problems associated with the only child. This inevitably has implications for parents' views on education.

The development of technology has contributed to the change in parents' views and behaviour, too. The introduction and development of information and communication technology has fundamentally transformed the way education is delivered, conceived, and evaluated. Technology has become an empowering tool for many parents. For example, parents in China have been using social media like WeChat to get information and make their own choices based on that information. During recent years, with an increasing number of smartphone users and the rise of social media, education and parenting have frequently appeared as popular topics in social media in China, where parents are offered a relatively open space to criticise and negotiate with the institutions of official education.

Parents are considered important stakeholders of education by researchers worldwide. When parents have consistent values with the curriculum, education goals are more likely to be reached (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Ho, 1995; Hornby, 2011; Lau, H.Li, & Rao, 2012). However, this may not always be the case in the Chinese context. Chinese parents' expectations and views of education are often contradictory with the ongoing education reforms (H. Li & Rao, 2000, 2005; H. Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012). The Western influence, promoted by China's integration into the globalisation process and reflected in the education reforms, is sometimes in tension with China's own traditions and cultures (King, 2002; W. Tu, 2002). Therefore, parents are usually left with a tough choice as to which value systems to adhere to, resulting in conflicts of educational values between parents and educational institutions. Against this backdrop, listening to parents' voices and understanding their values is important for educational institutions in order to build an effective partnership with families (Hornby, 2011). Moreover, listening to parents' views can reveal their aspirations and expectations of EYE in the context of the modernisation of Chinese education. Therefore, exploring parents' views of the current EYE and how the views reveal their aspirations for Chinese EYE modernisation constitutes the first two research questions for the proposed study (see section 1.5 for the research questions).

Moreover, different from the grand narrative of EYE in official discourse, parents' views on EYE also reflect the constructs of their own roles in children's education, which are influenced by various factors including the official educational discourse, curriculum, teachers' views, commercialisation of education, and the use of social media (Hornby, 2011). How they understand their own roles in the Chinese EYE context, is also part of my interest and will be the third research question to explore.

Having decided to look at parents in the rapidly changing Chinese context, I am fully aware that parents in China are not uniform. Therefore, I will not intend to pursue any generalisation from the study, but to get in-depth data for this particular group of parents in the WeChat group, Little MBA.

1.4.3 WeChat and the parents' group

The conversation among parents in section 1.2 took place in a virtual space in WeChat, a primary social media platform in China. It combines some essential functions of Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Today it is difficult to find a Chinese smartphone user who does not have the WeChat app installed on their phone. In fact, it is not only an important tool for social networking in contemporary Chinese society but also has been embedded in every aspect of contemporary Chinese life.

WeChat was designed primarily as a social media app for people to interact and communicate with others. This research will mainly utilise its communicative functions to interrogate the potential it has provided for doing educational research. Indeed, as its name has indicated, WeChat is foremost a chatting tool that people can use to communicate with others. It is also primarily the communicative function that education stakeholders, including parents, can use to comment, share, and discuss relevant issues. Some key functions of WeChat have been listed in Figure 1.1, including chatting, grouping, posting, and subscribing. These functions combined create a powerful platform for generating spontaneous data. Thus, the features of WeChat make it a rich, yet largely unexplored, site to get insights into Chinese education. Some of its features can be summarised as follows.

1. Security and accessibility. In WeChat, parents can choose their alias freely. The anonymity means they can express ideas relatively freely and securely compared with offline, face-to-face communication. This function is especially useful in the Confucian cultural context, where people tend to avoid direct, face-to-face confrontations. The relatively free expression and the constant flow of education materials also act as an attractive motive for Chinese parents to engage in WeChat. What equally makes WeChat popular is the simple and straightforward registration system. Those parents who have just shifted from traditional phones to smartphones can easily understand how to use it;
2. Mobility and flexibility. WeChat is used predominantly on mobile phones, so parents can receive information and participate in discussions flexibly. This frees up the parents from the temporal and spatial constraints of offline discussion groups (Piacenti, Rivas, and Garrett, 2014), making it possible for parents to make delayed comments, review, and catch up with discussions during free time; and parents are enabled to have conversations with others far away;
3. Connectivity. The functions and setup of WeChat enable participants as well as researchers to connect different sets of information to build up a complete picture of the WeChat users. For example, in the WeChat group in my study, I can have at least two sources of information. The first is through the group discussion board, where parents collectively discuss their concerns, initiate topics, and express their views on education to other group members. Here, texts, pictures, hyperlinks, videos, and any other modes of information can all be posted and shared. The second source of information is called the public account where people can publicise information to their subscribers. It is a fundamental component of the Little MBA group where parents' concerns and experts' articles, either original or forwarded from anywhere else, can be publicised (for a general idea of the two sources of information, see Figure 1.2);

Wide participation. The informants of my study come from different localities, which reflects the diversity of Chinese parents' backgrounds regarding geographic location; new media like WeChat breaks up the social markers which separate parents, for

example, location, gender, abilities, and socio-economic status, and provides a platform where they can all voice their concerns and views. This creates a very different dynamic in the WeChat group which would be difficult to achieve in an offline context.



Figure 1.1 Functions of WeChat



Figure 1.2 Sources of information

(The general information in Figure 1.2: on the left-hand side, one parent suggests the others watch a video and another parent shares an article about family study trips; in the picture on the right-hand side, a public account publicises several articles, with titles including 'free materials in numeracy, Chinese, English, logic, arts, everything free!', 'the 16 most important things for primary schoolers besides academic study', 'a story before bed: an arrogant ram', 'audio story: the wolf neighbour 03', 'English picture book with sound: A picture for Harold's room')

In this research, I mainly exploited the communicative nature of the app. WeChat is a social media platform and it is the primary space where the informants of my research lived their lives and was the informants' natural habitat (Parker Webster & Marques Da Silva, 2013). People created and communicated ideas there by textual conversations, emoji, and posts. In the study, informants' online discussion of EYE issues was closely associated with their experience of education offline. Their opinions, attitudes, and emotions towards education developed offline were also communicated and shared online. That is to say, the two worlds were not paralleled, but intertwined. Moreover, people's online activities in social media led to a change in their opinions, attitudes, emotions, and even practices in the offline space, which were then brought back for further discussion online. The relationship between the informants' online and offline spaces operates as a loop, which offers a window into understanding parents' perspectives on parenting and EYE.

In this study, social media like WeChat was the research site, the basis of informants' existence, and the mode of communication that mediated the interaction of the community (Howard & Jones, 2004). It was a site in a sense that informants, from various walks of life, were located there and lived their everyday life and interacted with each other. Traditionally, interaction in a research site is bounded by space and time. That is to say, informants' activities take place within a limited time with a marked boundary. The social media that accommodated this study, however, revolutionised and forwarded the notion of the research site (Hine, 2000; Parker Webster & Marques Da Silva, 2013). Through social media, people were enabled to cross the temporal and space barriers of traditional sites (Kendall, 2009). Indeed, social media like WeChat provides the material basis for the existence of informants online.

Specifically, my research focused on one parent group in WeChat named Little MBA. What distinguished this group from the others, which was suggested by its name, was its explicit focus on the cultivation of entrepreneurship and creativity. At a first glimpse, it seemed to

be a WeChat group that catered to a particular group of like-minded parents who shared an interest in entrepreneurship and creativity. However, having spent an extended time in the group, I found its topics covered many broad aspects of children's education. While most parents had been pursuing neoliberal values to various degrees, they also had a wide range of different educational agendas that were discussed in this group, ranging from the choice of schools, to academic pressure, to their plans to send children abroad. This group was like a kaleidoscope that reflected parents' different perspectives and pursuits, making it an ideal space for the study of Chinese parents' views and aspirations for EYE in this 'new era'.

1.5 Aims and research questions

The traditional study on parents' views and aspirations about education focused mainly on older children. Despite the increasing emphasis on the importance of EYE at the national level, little in-depth research had been carried out on parents' views, experience, and aspirations on EYE (W. Gu, 2008; Hu & Li, 2012; Kim & Fong, 2013). Also, even though social media had become parents' 'organic part in forming a realistic and accurate picture of their lifeworld' (Dong, 2017, p. 223) and had reshaped the communication landscape, it has rarely appeared in the academic debate. This research situated parents in a natural social media group in WeChat. Parents' activities, even though centred on EYE, often reflected the broader context of the development of Chinese education. Therefore, compared with the traditional study on Chinese parents and EYE, the current research was more open-ended which entailed innovation and interconnection. Parents were enabled to participate in and contribute to the EYE and parenting discussion in a way that could not be achieved in the traditional research sites, like home settings (Lareau, 2011), schools (Kipnis, 2011a) or hospitals (Kuan, 2015).

Therefore, this thesis aims to fill the research gap by carrying out an ethnographic study to explore parents' views on, and hopes for, Chinese EYE. In particular, it sought to understand how parents theorised their own parenting in the Chinese EYE context. WeChat was used as the primary research field and was recognised as the space to accommodate parents' views, attitudes, aspirations, and emotions. The study investigated the interweaving forces that were influencing EYE and parenting in China's 'new era', trying to find out how parents' views, aspirations, and understanding of EYE in China was shaped. In the process, it

investigated parents' different educational orientations and tried to explain how they were caught in between. It also demonstrated the strategies parents used to cope with dilemmas, uncertainties, and contradictions.

The following questions were developed to help navigate the research aims stated above:

1. What are parents' views about current EYE practice in China?
2. What do parents' views reveal about their aspirations for EYE?
3. What are their understandings of the role of parenting in EYE?

1.6 Outline of the thesis

The first chapter so far has introduced the background of this study. It aims to give a flavour of the Little MBA WeChat group and the affordances it has for EYE research. Also, it has briefly introduced the history of Chinese EYE to situate the current study in a larger context and to inform readers of how Chinese EYE and parents' views about it are connected with complex social, economic, and cultural factors.

In Chapter 2, I will provide a comprehensive contextual background of the research. I will introduce the cultural, policy, and institutional context in which the current research is situated. This chapter will help the readers, both familiar and unfamiliar with EYE in China, to better locate the study and understand the complexities of the research context. In this chapter, readers can understand the uniqueness of the Chinese educational context.

Chapter 3 is a literature review that helps situate the research in the academic context. It will review the evolution of Chinese EYE reform and development. Also, it will look at parents' contribution to EYE and focus on a few key works that shape Chinese parents' views and practices. I will then introduce some concepts that I will refer to in the analysis and presentation of the data.

Both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 are used to present the process of designing and implementing the research project. In chapter 4, I will discuss the methodological concerns and designs of the research. This study took an ethnographic approach in order to understand how parents perceive their children's education. I will use this chapter to present how the design of the

research was influenced by ethnographic theories and practice, and how I decided to innovatively reconceptualise some ethnographic notions to accommodate the current study. Chapter 5 will detail the procedures in locating, collecting, analysing, and presenting the data and consider some of the ethical considerations.

As shown in section 1.2 of this chapter, parents in the WeChat group argued the benefits of participating in the various forms of out-of-school classes. In fact, it was a repeated topic and was a thread followed by many parents for an extended period of time. In Chapter 6, I will interrogate why Chinese parents in this WeChat group had been enthusiastic about *ke wai ban*, the out-of-school learning arrangements that parents paid to register their children in. I will argue that such activities could translate into educational advantages and give children a better chance in the learning and employment environment. However, participating in such activities requires considerable investment and efforts from parents. In return, parents' involvement in such activities could contribute to the reproduction of their social status.

In Chapter 7, I will argue that parents viewed EYE as part of a long-term educational project, which was connected by a series of exams. In this section, I will show how *gaokao*, a national exam taken by students to enter university, started to influence parents' decisions in their children's early years. Other exams in the different stages of Chinese children's schooling had been influencing the early years learning as well. Parents' views of EYE were revealed from their preparation of the various exams during the early years. The academic pressure from the exams collided with the neoliberal values parents held towards EYE. In this chapter, I will also explore how parents navigated the educational dilemma between academic aspirations and their children's wellbeing.

Many of the parents in the group mentioned their willingness to engage their children in some form of Western education. Even some parents who defended the advantages of Chinese education also wanted their children to have some exposure to educational approaches they perceived as having a Western element. In doing so, their children were believed to gain an edge in the increasingly fierce educational competition. However, the meanings and understandings of 'Western education' vary considerably for parents. In Chapter 8, I argue that 'Western education' was constructed by different parents for their own agendas. Parents

used Western education to justify their own parenting strategies and express their own aspirations for the Chinese EYE provisions. Indeed, by exploring how Western education was perceived and constructed by Chinese parents in the WeChat group, the purpose of this chapter was to demonstrate how parents' views and aspirations about their children's education should be understood in the global context and how global, mainly Western, influences were exerting influence in the evolution of Chinese EYE reform and the modernisation process.

In Chapter 9, I will conclude by summarising the various chapters I have presented. I will also explain how the research questions have been successfully answered by summarising parents' views and aspiration on EYE in China, and how they understood their own roles in their children's education. In this chapter, I will also reflect on my own influence on the research process, the nature of the social media platform, the writing process and future directions for the research.

1.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided the general background and information of the research. I described how I came to know this Little MBA WeChat group and the unique features that made it distinctive from other studies on Chinese parents. I also gave a brief review of the development of EYE in China to contextualise the historical and policy background of the study, and how the lack of studies on parents in early years on social media in China's 'new era' has made this research necessary. The research questions were then introduced before an indication of how each of the following chapters will answer these questions. The next chapter will provide further background and contextual information knowledge of the research to help readers establish a comprehensive perspective of Chinese parents in EYE.

Chapter 2

The context

In the previous chapter, I have briefly introduced WeChat and some basic background information about EYE in China. In this chapter, I will analytically present the historical, policy, and technological background of the research. This chapter does not work as a simple description of the contextual facts; rather, it strives to be analytic and relevant to the chapters that will follow. It aims to be a reference point where readers can come back to find relevant information to better understand the thesis. This chapter will start by describing how ancient *mengxue* and *keju* have shaped contemporary parents' educational aspirations. It will then provide the detailed development of modern EYE in China. After that, the focus will be the contemporary exams that systematically shape the current Chinese education landscape. At the end of the chapter, I will specify the technological context that makes studying parents on social media possible. The existing academic studies on parents' views and practice will be dealt with in chapter 3.

2.1 *Mengxue* and *keju*: a historical perspective of Chinese education

Early years education (EYE) in China has a long history. Knowing about its historical context and development will help contextualise my research. In this section, I will first introduce the traditional form of Chinese EYE, *mengxue*, whose legacy still influences EYE practice today. It will be followed by an analysis of how *keju*, the imperial examination system, was used to select the state elite and how it is still influencing contemporary parents' mindset on education. The legacies of *keju* can be felt in *gaokao*, the college entrance examinations practiced in China which exerts great influence on the perspectives of Chinese people held towards education.

2.1.1 *Mengxue*: a historical form of Chinese EYE

In China, EYE is by no means a Western or recent invention. In Confucian society, children would receive *mengxue* as the first stage of educational development when the family could afford it. *Mengxue*, whose literal meaning is 'the enlightening education' in Chinese, was the principal institution children attended to receive Confucian teachings (He, 1998). The initial

contents of *mengxue* were very diverse, including the Six Arts that were proposed by Confucius, including rites, music, archery, martial arts, calligraphy and mathematics. Zhu Xi (1130-1200) was a key figure in advocating and developing *mengxue*. Born almost 1700 years after Confucius, Zhu Xi was regarded as a pioneer in Neo-Confucianism in 12th century China. He interpreted Confucianism based on the historical development in his own time and his work had significant influence on Chinese society. For him, *mengxue* was about enlightening young children with Confucian teachings. He held the view that young children should prepare to cultivate themselves towards ideal and moral human beings from a very young age. Therefore, it was important that young children could receive proper education and instruction that was developmentally appropriate (He, 1998).

Zhu Xi furthered Confucius' learning components and specified the learning contents that were especially important for children in his time. These components contained the basic abilities for children to live independently, e.g. *sa sao*, *ying dui*, *jintui*, which meant that a child should do the basic housework like cleaning a house and know how to behave in front of others appropriately and naturally. What he emphasised was that through housework, like sweeping the floor, a child should understand the importance and approach of self-cultivation and proceed to reason about morality. Through the learning process, a child should become increasingly mature and know the rules of *Li* (courteousness) and should learn '*zhong*, *xin*, *xiao*, *ti*' (to be sincere to others and themselves, and to love their parents and siblings). Zhu Xi also proposed the sequence of people's learning, which was also the purpose of education: '*xiu shen*, *qijia*, *zhiguo*, *pingtianxia*' (cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the country and harmonising the world). Zhu Xi compiled his ideas on *mengxue* into his book *xiaoxue*, which was regarded as an official textbook for *mengxue* from the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 AD) until the end of the Qing dynasty (early 20th century), after which Western EYE institutions were gradually introduced and accepted by the Chinese. The name of the book, *xiaoxue*, was later used as the Chinese name of the contemporary primary education system, despite the very different origins and meanings between the two concepts (He, 1998).

The purpose of *mengxue* education was highly politicised. Its primary purpose was to cultivate children so that they could understand and deal with various relationships,

including the relationship with oneself, the family, the country and the entire world (He, 1998; Huang, 2012). It focused on the cultivation of ideal personhood in the Confucian framework, aiming at the development of a whole person, rather than focusing merely on academic subjects. It also explored the relationship between self-cultivation, learning, morality and achievement, which to some extent laid the foundation for the notion of *suzhi*, which can be roughly translated as the human quality, developed in the 20th century (*suzhi* will be discussed in detail in section 3.3).

Mengxue education, however, could be rather stiff and rigid, especially for young children. Learning the Chinese characters was the first learning goal, which required children to read and write them repeatedly. Once they were able to read, they had to read and recite the classics of Confucianism work (He, 1998). Learning the Confucian classics was not only for self-cultivation purposes, but also for a more practical purpose. For many parents in ancient China, *mengxue* to a large extent was preparation for *keju* exams.

2.1.2 *Keju*: the imperial exams

In this section, I will briefly introduce the key exams in Chinese education and how they are influencing Chinese EYE (particularly prominent in Chapter 7). In this section, I argue that *gaokao*, as well as other exams in different stages of the Chinese education system, has deep cultural roots with its ancient predecessor *keju*, an imperial exam system serving as the government's official selection system in China for more than one thousand years. *Keju* started to function as early as the 7th century and was only abolished as late as 1905, a little more than 100 years ago, amid threats from Western imperialist countries over the survival of the nation (Bai, 2017). *Keju* was blamed for being one of the reasons for the country's backwardness and was seen as an outdated system that hindered progress, creativity and innovation (B. Wu & Devine, 2017).

The primary purpose of *keju* was to select government officials through the assessment of their knowledge and application of Confucianism. In ancient China, the widely acknowledged social hierarchy was *shi*, *nang*, *gong*, *shang*, which meant scholar-officials, peasants, artisans and merchants (B. Wu & Devine, 2017). Scholar-officials topped the social strata and their positions were achieved by participating and winning in the meritocratic *keju* exams. Unlike ancient India, where society was bounded by a caste system, *keju* was

open to the vast majority of the public and provided a relatively fair and meritocratic vehicle for social mobility (Kipnis, 2011a; B. Wu & Devine, 2017). Through self-cultivation and hard work, one was entitled to participate in *keju* and eventually become a scholar-official working for the government. Even though the pathway was by no means easy or smooth, it did give ordinary people hopes to become part of the social elite. Therefore, *keju* left a deep imprint on the Chinese cultural psychology and built the link between self-cultivation, education, exams, and socioeconomic rewards (Suen, 2005). *Keju* promised status, honour, and wealth for exam winners, a fact which has significantly influenced contemporary Chinese parents' educational mind-sets, even today. Parents in China hold high expectations of the socioeconomic return on their children's education, which can partly explain their aspirations for their children's performance in exams from a very young age (see section 7.3 and section 7.4).

The contents, form, and organisation of *keju* also significantly influenced the way people prepared for exams. Today, it still has an important implication on Chinese parents' educational views and aspirations. *Keju* emphasised memorisation and application of Confucian classics. In order to outperform in the exams, rote learning and repetition of knowledge were widely practiced. Furthermore, *keju* had strict rules with regards to the format of the essay students could write and it strictly confined the ideas they could express. Anything that was against the teachings of Confucianism was forbidden. The restrictions meant that test-takers could hardly show critical thinking or express any innovative idea. Also, exam preparation, more than anything else, topped the priority of education for learners in imperial China (Suen, 2005).

Keju was held at three levels: county, provincial, and national. Only the examinees who excelled at a lower level could proceed into a higher level exam. The winners at each level would be granted positions in different ranks of government. At the highest level, usually the emperor himself would be the examiner, and those who excelled would be directly awarded a high-ranking post in government. For the other examinees who participated in the lower levels, there would still be chances to be placed in government posts depending on their performance in *keju* exams at local levels. Having opportunities to engage in public

service was highly valued in Confucianism for a fulfilled life and was seen as a higher level goal for education in ancient China.

Except for the emperors, most key positions of the imperial Chinese government, from prime ministers and ministers of national departments, to provincial and county governors and city mayors, were predominantly selected by *keju* (Suen, 2005). There were abundant cases in Chinese history where people from humble background took the *keju* exam and moved to become part of the social elite as scholar-officials. Many parents today continue to hope that their children can earn credentials by taking various exams, and finally become part of the social elite.

By the late 19th century, continuous failure in wars with several foreign countries and an ill-organised reform had dramatically weakened the power and legitimacy of Qing, China's last imperial Dynasty. Seen as a symbol of the backwardness of imperial China, *keju* was officially abolished in 1905, shortly before the Qing Dynasty was overturned in 1911. A republic government was set up in 1912 and Confucianism, as a state ideology, was abolished. Accordingly, *mengxue*, the Confucian educational establishment, was also gradually replaced by modern, Western education institutions.

Even though *keju* and *mengxue* were effectively abolished in the early 20th century at the official level, their legacy still influences the way education is perceived and practiced by Chinese people today (Bai, 2017). Exams in today's China promise practical benefits to students, just like the upward mobility brought by the *keju* exam. Indeed, in ancient time, children's preparation for *keju* from a young age was in many ways similar to their contemporaries' preparation for *gaokao* (college entrance exams) and the various other exams that exist today (B. Wu & Devine, 2017). Furthermore, Chinese students inherited qualities like diligence, meticulousness, and an emphasis on the memorisation of essential knowledge. Meanwhile, however, people have blamed *keju* exams for the broad adoption of rote learning and discouraging of creativity and innovation in Chinese education. Different from the origin of Western EYE, which had religious underpinnings and adopted the educational approach based on play and individualism (Manning, 2005), due to the influence of *keju*, Chinese EYE has always had a firm root in the preparation for future

exams, realisation of personal ambition, and the desire for upward mobility (Pang & Richey, 2007; Vaughan, 1993). The importance of exams in parents' EYE aspirations will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Chinese parents in the Little MBA WeChat group still saw receiving education and participating in various exams as a relatively fair and significant way to gain upward social mobility. Accordingly, self-striving and self-discipline, both desirable qualities in the preparation for *keju*, were seen by the parents as the desired ethics for working and learning. Chapter 7 will discuss parents' belief in the functions of the exams, while Chapter 8 will look at parents' favourable attitudes towards self-cultivation, which all have roots in the legacies of *keju* and its associated dispositions.

As a Chinese concept, *suzhi* will be mentioned throughout the thesis (see section 3.5 for a detailed discussion of *suzhi*). *Suzhi* has incorporated the traditional values associated with Confucianism and *keju* discussed before, and it also reflects the changes brought about by Communism and neoliberalism (Cheng, 2016). Therefore, even though *suzhi* was a word that only came into use in the official education discourse in the past three decades (D. Lin, 2017, p. 2; Q. Lin, 2009), it was not a brand new term invented in a vacuum. Rather, there is a continuum between *suzhi* and the Chinese imperial education system and Confucian traditions which valued self-cultivation and excellence in exams.

A quick review of the *keju* and *mengxue* reveals that the educational aspirations in the WeChat group, explicit in parents' expectations of their children's academic performance in exams, have historical roots in China. Today it is just expressed in a more complicated way due to various factors including Western influences. Even though both *keju* and *mengxue* were abolished a century ago, people in China still value exams and the learning dispositions associated with *keju*, like obedience, hard work, and rote learning. In the meantime, in today's China, a series of neoliberal influences, like freedom, entrepreneurship, and creativity have also become desired. Parents have to deal with the conflicts and inconsistencies themselves to ensure the success of their children's education. For example, in Chapter 6, we see how parents were eager to send their children to join various educational programs to enhance their children's performance in exams. At the same time,

they wanted to give their children opportunities to learn different arts, sports or other skills in order to become creative and innovative. In the following section, I will focus on the development of contemporary EYE institutions.

2.2 The development of modern early years education in China – a policy perspective

In July 2018, the Ministry of Education issued a policy document named the *Notice of the Rectification of the 'Primary-schoolisation of Preschools'*. In the document, it urged preschools to practice play-based education and resolutely put an end to the '*primary-schoolisation of preschools*' (Ministry of Education, 2018). It proposed several tasks in its articles, including to 'forbid teaching the curriculum contents of primary schools in preschools', 'rectify the pedagogies that were primary-schoolised', 'and that 'the primary schools should teach on the premise that their students have no foundational knowledge learnt in preschools'. Primary-schoolisation means that early years educators in China were using the pedagogy, curriculum and assessment of primary schools to deal with EYE. It was a common practice in many preschools in China that were against the official play-based EYE curriculum.

In fact, a similar policy was enacted eight years ago in 2011. In December of that year, the government issued a *Notice of the Ministry of Education to Standardise the Care and Education to Prevent and Correct the Phenomenon of 'Primary schoolisation' of Preschools*. In the document, it was explicitly expressed that preschools should 'obey the rules of children's physical and mental development, and rectify the "primary schoolisation" of its contents and pedagogy.' The educational authority was instructed to 'forbid preschools to teach the contents of primary school curricula. Preschools should not set up any enrichment classes, gifted education classes or experiment classes⁶ and use them to teach in advance or conduct intensive academic training. Moreover, preschools should not assign homework for children'. Regarding primary school admission practices, the document said that the authorities should 'forbid all forms of selection exams of primary schools...children should

⁶ In the Chinese context, experiment classes offer educational services that use innovative and experimental pedagogy and curriculum. In practice, students in the experiment classes usually have to deal with a heavy workload.

go to the primary schools in their catchment area. Primary schools should not hold any exams, interviews or tests for selection, and they cannot admit students by students' performance in various competitions'.

The problems the 2011 policy had tried to address were still present in the 2018 policy document. One of the reasons for the 'primary schoolisation' may be attributed to the various exams in the current Chinese education system discussed in section 2.3. EYE today has frequently been subject to criticism for its adoption of primary school curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, even though both policy documents above stress the importance of education that is suitable to children's development in early years.

Modern EYE in China developed from the late Qing dynasty. In the early 20th century, Chinese intellectuals began to borrow educational ideas from the West. In the late 1910s and 1920s, Chinese intellectuals began to reflect on the cultural and structural causes for China's problems amid humiliating encounters with Western imperialist powers. This reflection provided a comprehensive scrutiny of Confucianism in Chinese history, coupled with a movement to study from educational practices in Western countries. Chinese intellectuals in the early 20th century had focused on learning science and democracy, trying to apply them to education (Murray, 2012). This was marked by the progressive education movement after the visit of the American philosopher John Dewey during 1919-1921. Against this background, many experimental schools and preschools were opened in big cities in China. However, these experiments were primarily interrupted by the Japanese invasion during the Second World War.

Following victory in the Chinese Civil War, the Chinese Communist Party came to power and founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. Communism became the official ideology in mainland China. As part of the education system, EYE provision was accordingly organised based on the Soviet model and it was attempted to rid it of its Confucian tradition which the Communist Party saw as a legacy of feudalism. In this period, a large number of preschools were built adjacent to the state-owned factories to serve the families of the workers so that they could concentrate on working. Collective activities were widespread and promoted to reflect Communist values. Subject-based teaching and learning were conducted in the

preschools as well. Individual choices, freedom, and creativity were not highlighted in preschools in this period.

The failed Communist experiment during Mao's rule of China led to the changing of its education. Following Mao's death in 1976, China began its reform and gradually opened up to the world. EYE reform soon followed, marked by the *Regulations on Preschool Education Practice (trial)* (Chinese National Education Commission, 1989). It was the first time since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that the country began to systematically learn from the Western EYE theory and to gradually change its previous curriculum which was subject-based, teacher-centred, and instruction-dominated. In 2001, the *Preschool Education Guidelines* (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2001) was issued, which, based on Western EYE theory, served to speed up the building of a new curriculum approach that was play-based and child-centred (Y. Pan & Liu, 2008). This round of educational reforms since the 1980s has borrowed the idea of respecting children, learning by play, integrated classes, child-centeredness, and individualised learning ideas (Liu & Pan, 2013).

In recent years, EYE has received more attention from the public and government. In the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* (Chinese State Council, 2010a), EYE has been listed as one of the eight national missions in education and received the most comments and suggestions in the public opinion gathering phase (Liu & Pan, 2013). In the same year of 2010, the State Council issued *the Proposals on the Development of Early Childhood Education* (Chinese State Council, 2010b). The ideas in the aforementioned reforms were further advocated by these documents.

In 2012, the Ministry of Education released the *Guidelines on the Learning and Development for Three to Six Year Old Children*. The policy attempted to curb the 'primary schoolisation' of preschool education, clearly stressing the government's disapproval of teaching foundational knowledge in preschool, and academic oriented education in preschool. It further argued that 'it is short-sighted and harmful to neglect the development of children's learning dispositions, and merely pursue learning of knowledge and skills'. The document

also urged educators and parents to see children's development as individualised and re-emphasised the value of play in children's learning and development.

Chinese scholars have realized that EYE reform is not culture neutral (Jiang & Deng, 2008). Since the EYE reform began, the discussion about the balance of the promotion of Chinese culture and borrowing of Western ideas in EYE has never stopped. Hua (2007) claimed that since the EYE reform aimed to modernise EYE, and modern EYE was based on Western values which could be traced back from the Enlightenment, it came as no surprise that the fundamental values in the EYE reforms in China were Western-based. However, in practice, the Western values of EYE are challenged by parents and teachers who hold traditional Chinese views of education (Guan & Meng, 2007; Hua, 2007). Chinese parents in particular, whose expectations of their children's education is influenced by their Confucian educational and cultural background, are very likely to get lost when their long-held traditions are de-emphasized in the educational reform, which downplays self-discipline, conformity, and academic study (H. Li & Rao, 2000, 2005; H. Li et al., 2012). The conflicts in the values in EYE are pushed further by the exams in Chinese education, which will be discussed in the following section.

2.3 *Xiao sheng chu, zhongkao and gaokao* – exams in Chinese education

The previous section focused on the development of EYE in China. In this section, I will look at the bigger picture and will briefly introduce the education system that is relevant to EYE. It intends to situate EYE in a broader educational context. In China, what threads the various stages of education together are the exams that take place at the end of each education phase. They are *xiao sheng chu* at the end of primary school, *zhongkao* at the end of junior secondary school, and *gaokao* at the end of senior secondary school. In this section, instead of describing the various stages of education, I will use the exams as the markers of each stage, as it is more meaningful to discuss the exams which were frequently represented in the WeChat group of Little MBA. This is illustrated in chapter 6 and chapter 7 when parents repeatedly referred to the various exams in their discussion of children's EYE.

After children finish preschool, they progress into the nine years of compulsory education. Although children usually attend schools in their catchment area during the compulsory education stage, which runs from grade 1 in primary school to grade 9 in junior secondary school, parents sometimes send their children to a non-catchment area school in pursuit of a better education. This can be done either by buying property and transferring housing registrations to a new catchment area where a better school is located, or paying some form of additional fees (especially in the case of private or international schools). Usually, choosing a school also means participating in the various selective entrance exams with various forms and contents.

2.3.1 *Xiao sheng chu*

Primary schooling is the first stage in China's nine years of compulsory education. It comprises six grades and children start the first grade in September after they turn six. The first three grades are usually regarded as part of early years education. *Xiao sheng chu*, which means primary school progressing into junior secondary school, is the selection exam held at the end of primary schooling. According to the *Law of Compulsory Education*, primary school graduates who finish their grade 6 in primary school are entitled to register at the junior secondary school in their catchment area without any selection tests. However, a few private junior secondary schools, or public schools renowned for high-quality educational resources, still conduct the tests to select students who can match their high standard. Unlike *zhongkao* or *gaokao*, which will be discussed later in this section, local government is forbidden to administer a uniform test for *xiao sheng chu*. Therefore, each junior secondary school will invent its own form and contents of *xiao sheng chu*. It can range from maths and Chinese literature to arts and sports. When parents in my research group were deciding which extracurricular class to enrol their children in, *xiao sheng chu* became an important factor to consider (see chapter 6). For many parents who were unsatisfied with the junior secondary schools in their catchment area, *xiao sheng chu* was likely to be a chance for them to actively pursue high quality educational resources.

2.3.2 *Zhongkao*

Not all children will sit *xiao sheng chu*. If they simply go to a junior school in their catchment area, parents do not have to worry too much about the selection tests. However, most parents in my WeChat group had to consider *zhongkao* and *gaokao* exams as their children progress to the further stages of schooling.

Zhongkao is the senior secondary school selection exam held at the end of children's three years' junior secondary schooling. In China, *zhongkao* also marks the end of compulsory education. It is usually ministered by local education authorities and has uniform form and content across the municipality.

Public senior secondary schools usually admit local students according to their performance in *zhongkao*. In the senior secondary schools, children would receive three years' education to prepare for *gaokao*, the national college entrance examinations. The result of *zhongkao* would to a large extent determine the type, quality, and resources of the senior secondary schools children can join, which would in turn influence their performance in *gaokao*, the national college exams – arguably the most influential education event in China.

2.3.3 *Gaokao*

Unlike *zhongkao*, *gaokao* not only evaluates children's learning in the three years of senior secondary school study, but it has also become an educational phenomenon that influences the entire education system in China. Even parents with children in the EYE stage would consider *gaokao* as part of their educational aspirations, as shown in section 7.2.

Gaokao is the Chinese national college entrance examination system. Its forms, goals and scope are all designed or approved by the central government. However, in practice, it is usually administered at the provincial level and has variations across different regions of the country. In most provinces, *gaokao* is held from the 7th to 9th June every year. Currently, the most common form of *gaokao* is a '3+X' model. The '3' stands for the three basic subjects that are tested for all of the examinees, including Chinese, maths, and foreign language (mostly English); then students can choose from one of the two 'X' approaches. One approach is social science, testing subjects on history, politics, and geography in one paper; the other approach is natural science. with physics, chemistry and biology in one paper (M. Gu & Magaziner, 2016).

Gaokao is an annual national event and ritual in which not only the examinees but also parents and the whole of society get involved (B. Wu & Devine, 2017). In 2015, nearly 9.5 million students sat *gaokao* for admission to higher education (M. Gu & Magaziner, 2016), but a much larger population beyond the examinees is involved every year in other ways.

The parents of the examinees can be granted leave to take care of their children. Construction sites may halt during the exams to minimise the noise audible to the examinees. Taxi drivers are encouraged to offer free rides for those who have to commute a long distance to the exam sites. Police officers and armed soldiers even patrol the area around the exam sites to maintain order, and they also cordon off streets near the examination areas to keep the exam sites quiet. After the exam results are released at the end of June, the entire family usually gets together to study the university options that match the scores. If the scores are unsatisfactory, parents may ask their children to repeat one year or more in senior secondary school and sit *gaokao* for a second time. For those who successfully make their way into the famous universities, it is not uncommon for parents to invite dozens of their relatives and friends to join their celebration in a restaurant reception.

Gaokao in China is believed by the general public to be the ‘baton of the conductor in an orchestra’, meaning it has the power to direct the entire educational system. It orchestrates and regulates the pedagogy, evaluation, and curriculum of the entire education system that precedes university education. In section 7.4, I show how many parents in the WeChat group started to prepare for *gaokao* in EYE more than ten years before it would take place. These parents would project *gaokao* when making educational choices in children’s early years as they believed that the education endeavour they made then was only meaningful if it could be transformed into an improved performance in *gaokao*.

2.4 The influence of social media on EYE – a technological perspective

This research took place on the platform of social media. The use of social media had wide implications. It not only influenced the methodologies of the research (I will detail how the functions of WeChat influenced the data collection and analysis in sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3), but also shaped the format, quality, and characteristics of the data on parents’ decision making and perspectives towards EYE. In Chapter 1, I have briefly introduced WeChat and its basic functions. In the methodological discussion in Chapter 4, I will explain how the use of WeChat influenced the design of the research. In this chapter, I will situate the use of WeChat in the context of people’s everyday use of social media and examine how social media has fundamentally shaped people’s understanding and perspectives of education.

The definition of social networking media varies across literature. Mazman and Usluel (2010) claimed that social networking media could be understood from two perspectives. One is the social aspect, including its potential for communication and cooperation. The other is about the design and structural aspects, including components like profiles, albums, walls for writing, friends lists, etc. Through these functions and components, social media offered affordances for education and learning. Nowadays, people use media not only to receive information but also to create their own knowledge by communicating, cooperating, commenting, sharing, feeding, and interacting (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015; Mazman & Usluel, 2010). In education, social media also blurs the boundary between formal learning and informal learning (Mason & Rennie, 2007). In the WeChat group of my study, by reading, sharing, and even composing information in the group, parents were conducting informal learning among themselves. The use of social media changed the way these parents accessed information and knowledge on parenting and education.

In this way, social media also changes the learning landscape. It empowers learners and makes them the active receivers of information and the co-authors of knowledge. It helps create online platforms where users can form learning communities, collaborate, learn, and share knowledge and skills (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015; Mao, 2014). Through its designs and functions, social media enables users to create their own homepage and profile, display their likes (or dislikes), and generate and share users' content. This user-generated knowledge sometimes comes into conflict with the traditional expert knowledge (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015). In this WeChat group, it was increasingly clear that parents relied less on knowledge and information from the traditional educational experts who would previously be regarded as the unquestionable authority and the source of correct knowledge; instead, parents in the WeChat depended more on the knowledge that was generated among themselves (see chapter 8 on parents' understanding of Western education). Accordingly, social media changes the power relationship in the knowledge production process. Nowadays, users can use social media to seek peer support, collaborate, and evaluate and assess the knowledge. Knowledge is validated by the peer review of the engaged community and the expertise can be generated through interaction in the social media (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015). Jenkins (2009) claimed that a participatory digital culture had

been created where ordinary people were empowered to work with or even replace experts to take the authorship of knowledge. In this WeChat group, an increasing number of parents started to become the self-learning experts through the 'peer-reviewed' contribution of knowledge in the parents' community. By sharing their knowledge and opinions with their peers, parents achieved the recognition of others by commenting and receiving compliments and 'likes' on their posts. This feature will be made explicit in Chapter 7.3 where Jixi was able to talk like an experienced mother even though she had not had a child yet.

Many of the WeChat posts that were shared by its users came from the so-called 'official accounts.' These accounts, as sources of information, were not official in the traditional sense, as some of the account writers had no institutional endorsement at all. Furthermore, the backgrounds of these 'official accounts' could vary considerably. Some of the accounts were opened by recognised institutions. Others could have been accounts opened by any individual who made a simple and straightforward application by providing personal details and complied with WeChat's user terms. To some extent, ordinary people had been empowered to give 'official' information through WeChat, which had led to the re-definition of the meaning of 'official'. The authority, popularity and credibility of these 'official accounts' came from *liuliang*, or rate of flow, an indicator of the number of readers, followers, and subscriptions. A popular post of high *liuliang* circulated via WeChat could have influence beyond the scope of WeChat and became a hot social topic and phenomenon in society at large. In my study, many high *liuliang* posts triggered parents' discussion and became the source of their perspectives and views (see section 7.4 where a post falsely claimed to be written by Nobel Laureate Mo Yan became a hot topic in the group).

In China, media has been subject to government control and censorship. There is no exception for social media. The government's attitudes and policies concerning media has always 'vacillated between exercising control and encouraging growth.' (Yu, 2009, p. 19). On the one hand, the government has implemented censorship in search engine websites to filter the politically sensitive messages; on the other hand, it encourages the growth of

media to embrace the flow of information in an increasingly globalised and commercialized world market, which intrinsically calls for a more open public sphere (McCormick & Liu, 2003; Yu, 2009). The new media in China used to experience a tension of dichotomy between freedom and control, hegemony, and anti-hegemony. However, I argue that in the WeChat group of my study the dichotomy has been turned into a more dynamic relationship played out through the relationships among the parents' perspectives, the state education system, and traditional and Western influences. As a premier social media app in China, WeChat is undoubtedly subject to government control; however, compared with traditional media, WeChat still enjoys relative freedom. Parents can have various channels of information and are empowered to manufacture and circulate parenting and education information among themselves (Shoup et al., 2015). In the Little MBA WeChat group, parents could openly criticise the established education systems and express their views towards education, as illustrated in Chapter 8 when they discussed how they engaged in Western education approaches to balance the weakness of Chinese education. Therefore, WeChat becomes a unique platform to provide unfiltered information that can provide the answers to the research questions.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced the historical, policy, institutional, and technological contexts of the research. During the process, I linked the contexts with my thesis. By doing so, I aim to contextualise the study and provide a space to which readers can refer for background knowledge. I introduced the historic development of EYE, from *megnxue* to preschools reform in China. I also discussed how various exams, from the imperial *keju* to the contemporary exams, shaped Chinese perspectives in education. I also discussed the use of social media as a technological context. In the next chapter, I will examine the theories and academic discussions that informed my research.

Chapter 3

Literature review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews relevant research to highlight the contribution to knowledge made by this study. This chapter differs from the previous chapter in that it mainly focuses on relevant empirical and theoretical research, whereas Chapter 2 was dedicated to providing knowledge on the contextual background, with the rationale of situating the research discussed in this chapter within its social, historical, and technological contexts. Chapters 2 and 3 work together as a continuous process that narrows down, contextualises, and informs my current PhD study. This chapter will incorporate studies that have informed the design, analysis, and writing of my research, although it does not intend to exhaust all the literature in the area. Among them, I will highlight a few key studies that have significantly shaped my conceptualisation and understanding. These works include *Love's Uncertainty: The Politics and Ethics of Child Rearing in Contemporary China* by Teresa Kuan (2015), *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling In China* by Andrew Kipnis (2011a), *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* by Vanessa Fong (2004), and *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* by Annette Lareau (2003). These studies provide insights as to how Chinese parents' views towards education can be understood from ethnographic perspectives. They either directly relate to Chinese parents and their relationship with other educational stakeholders or are classic studies providing insights on framing parents' educational endeavours.

The chapter will first give a general introduction to parents' involvement in education in order to foreground its importance to the study. Then it will focus on some key studies mentioned above. In the third section, it will shed light on two perspectives: education as a commodity in the market, and *suzhi* education (education for quality). The selection of literature in this chapter aims at answering the research questions in 1.5. The research on parental involvement highlights the significant roles parents play in education. The following introduction of the key ethnographic studies lays the foundation of the conceptualisations of the parents' views and aspirations in my study. The marketisation of education and *suzhi*

further provide the conceptual tools needed to understand these parents' perspectives and roles, which are particularly relevant under China's neoliberal educational policies existing at the time of the research. Therefore, this review of the previous research provides the base upon which my research questions can be answered.

There is some literature in the Chinese language on parents' perspectives on EYE. It discusses a range of issues including differences between parents' and grandparents' educational perspectives (Wang; & Peng, 2008) and the educational perspectives of single-parent families (Chen, 2008). I did not elaborate on these studies as they either focused on infants, or wrote about their personal reflections. As a result, I decided to give more weight to the literature in the English language presented in the later sections which had exerted heavier influence on my study.

3.2 Parental involvement in early years education

Globally, early years is seen as a crucial period for children's lifelong development. Investing in early years education can break the cycle of poverty, close the inequality gap, and improve citizens' standards of living and productivity (OECD, 2017; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj - Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; UNESCO, 2017). Early years educational institutions and communities have to work together and build connections in order to produce quality early years education (Ang & Sims, 2016). Parents in the early years education context are seen as important players in their children's education: they are seen as active participants in (pre)schooling and can bring the home, schools, and the community together (Epstein, 2010). Indeed, parents' influence has gone well beyond the family sphere and carries social, cultural, and historical meanings.

My study focuses on parents' views, perspectives of, and aspirations for their children's EYE and how they understand their own roles in the education process. These can all be explicated through the parents' own educating and parenting practices. Therefore, in this section, I open the literature review by briefly introducing and evaluating the existing studies on parents' roles and parental involvement in children's education. Compared with the works on parenting practice in a specific area and locality reviewed in later sections, this part provides a general discussion on the role of parents in children's education. By doing

so, I aim to further highlight the importance of parents in children's EYE and justify why this is worth studying.

For children in their early years, parents' educating and caring are usually inseparable. Parents' child-rearing practices, or parenting, refers to parents' practices that make use of their physical, social, and emotional resources to promote a child's development and help a child grow from an immature state to a mature state (Davies & Barton, 2000, p. 245). Early parenting research was conducted mainly by developmental psychologists. They focused on discussions around what constitutes 'good parenting' and what was appropriate parenting practice. Early parenting research held a relatively simplistic view of parenting styles which could be roughly categorised as authoritative and authoritarian styles (Baumrind, 1971). Parents who adopted the different parenting styles tended to perceive their roles in EYE differently, but many of the early parenting studies were based on quantitative research on parents' perspectives (Chen, 2008; G. Li, 2006).

Another way to conceptualise parents' roles in education is through parental involvement, which is a notion that broadly refers to the participation of parents in their children's education, development, and growth (Hornby, 2011). Parental involvement mainly deals with the relationship between parents and professionals in preschools and schools. It can also denote the activities parents conduct with their children in home settings, such as shared reading activities (H. Li, Rao, & Lau, 2011).

Parental involvement has been widely held to be beneficial to children's development (Hornby, 2011). For children, it improves their attitudes, skills, dispositions, and overall performance in preschools and schools alike (Griffith, 1996; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hornby, 2011; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). It can enhance children's school readiness and improve their literacy, numeracy, and reading abilities (E Lau, Li, & Rao, 2011).

Educators in preschools and schools welcome parental involvement as it helps realise curricular goals. Particularly in lower grades, the parental role is more salient and crucial. Parents can not only provide effective supervision and help children prepare and review the curricular contents, but also inform teachers of their children's performance (Hornby, 2011).

Hornby (2011) placed parental involvement into six categories according to parents' relationships with education professionals. These six categories included the protective model, expert model, transmission model, curriculum-enrichment model, consumer model, and partnership model. These different models were built upon how parents established and mediated their relationship with education professionals. In these different models, even though parents were all seen as stakeholders of education, they would exhibit different aspirations and expectations towards education. Parents in different models also shared different degrees of authority with teachers. Besides these models, parents were seen as the audience, learners, teachers, volunteers, or decision-makers in education (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). As in the study on parental involvement in education, the parents focused on enhancing school performance. Regardless of the types of their involvement, the purpose of these parents' educational engagement was directed towards improving their children's performance in official education institutions.

However, nowadays the way parents are involved in children's education is different. In my study, parents' involvement and practices were fundamentally shaped by the platform of WeChat. In WeChat, parents took on sustained and intensive discussions in a parent group. They actively sought information and instruction for their children's education; in the meantime, they were keen to share their ideas with others. Their involvement with their children's education was informal and integrated in their daily life. Parental involvement was no longer constrained to encounters with educators; they could be involved in their children's EYE while at leisure or on a commute. In the WeChat group, anything was potentially educational. From the choice for children's *ke wai ban* (see section 5.2) to prenatal education suggestions (see section 7.3), parents were involved in a wide range of activities on a social media platform. This complicated the involvement models mentioned above, renewed their relationships with the official education system, and gave them more opportunities to intervene in their children's education. In my research, the use of social media diversified and opened new possibilities for parental involvement and generated parents' new perspectives on their children's education that was worth studying.

There are different factors influencing parents' perspectives towards education. These can vary from parents' social class positions (Lareau, 2011) to governmental policies and imperatives (Fong, 2004; Kipnis, 2011a), to the contingencies of the family's day to day life (Kuan, 2015). Previous studies looked at the different aspects of parents' views and practices to which I will return later in more detail. Furthermore, there are generic factors influencing parental involvement including individual parent and family factors, parent-teacher factors, child factors, and social and cultural factors (Hornby, 2011). In my research, the prominent features of WeChat as a primary social media platform contributed to another element that shaped parents' perspectives and practices, which has not yet been explored in the existing literature.

The general discussion on parents' roles and involvement in their children's education above aims to situate this research in a wider discussion of parents' involvement and roles in their children's education. In the Chinese context, parents have traditionally been defined as children's primary teachers and were viewed as important partners in children's education (Zhang, 2009). I examine Chinese parents' educational perspectives and practice in more detail in the following sections. In the next section, I narrow down parents' educational engagement and focus on some studies that have significantly shaped my understanding of Chinese parents' views and practice.

3.3 Conceptualising parents' endeavours

The previous section presents a wide discussion on the significance, types, and influencing factors of parental involvement. In this section, I review four specific studies on parenting practice that significantly shaped my research. These four major works, either directly involving Chinese parents or illuminating parents' endeavours, will be analysed and reviewed. *Love's Uncertainty: The Politics and Ethics of Child Rearing in Contemporary China* by Teresa Kuan (2015) used an anthropological lens to understand the various layers of parents' expectations and anxieties in contemporary China. *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling In China* by Andrew Kipnis (2011a) is an ethnographic study into Chinese parents' strong educational commitment to their children's education, which he termed as 'education desire'. *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* by Vanessa Fong (2004) examined the consequences of China's one child policy on

education. They all contributed to my understanding of current research in various ways. The previous three pieces of research were undertaken in the Chinese context by scholars either of Western backgrounds with an interest in China or researchers of Chinese heritage. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* by Annette Lareau (2003) was set in the US and interrogated how class had differentiated parenting approaches in children's education, leisure time, and family. It provided a class-based perspective on parenting in the American context, which I can compare and contrast with my research on Chinese social media (see Chapter 6). These works were all conducted with an ethnographic approach and relate to the parents' views and practices. They illuminated how to analyse, conceptualise, and write parents' views and practices in ethnographic study.

3.3.1 *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy*

I will first go back to the early 2000s and review an ethnographic study on the experience of parents who belonged to the first generation of China's single child policy. Fong (2004) conducted her ethnographic research in the north-eastern coastal city of Dalian. By carrying out a survey and participant observation in home and school contexts with secondary school children in roughly grades 8-12, she focused on the consequences and implications of the one-child policy on the educational practice of parents who grew up as the first generation 'single child' under China's birth control policy implemented since the late 1970s. She spent 27 months studying the subjectivities, experiences, and aspirations of the Chinese single child. For Fong, these parents were unique as they were the first generation of parents who were subject to both the population control policy and Chinese economic development. Fong asked two questions, 'Will a generation of Chinese singletons with unprecedented education and ambition make a road that will lead them, their families, and their country to a dominant position in the capitalist world system? Will the road they make be wide enough to accommodate all of them?' (2004, p. 182).

She claimed that the one-child policy had brought these Chinese children the aspirations and educational opportunities that matched their first-world counterparts, which required massive parental investment (2004b, pp. 2-3). In her research, parents' and students' ambitions clashed with the limited resources at the family's disposal. China's development during the two decades since Fong's study finished has substantially improved the living standards for urban dwellers in cities like Dalian. In my research, the material constraint

experienced by parents in her study was no longer a major challenge. Fong attributed parents' hopes and aspirations to the one-child policy, but my research found that population policy alone was not sufficient in explaining these high parental expectations. After more than three decades' practice, the birth control policy has been largely loosened during the recent years, with the 'two children' policy now replacing the highly controversial 'one child' policy, where families today are allowed, indeed encouraged, to have two children to tackle the various problems brought by the one-child policy, including an increasingly ageing society. However, what has not changed is the tremendous parental pressure for children to compete for elite status. Fong also proposed that modernisation was a cultural model that children and parents have internalised during their daily life. The hopes of families for their children's outstanding educational performance and the ensuing successful career reflected parents' cultural model of modernity to pursue economic prosperity for the individual family and the nation at large.

Fong's research took place at a time when the Chinese economy could not support and realise parents' inflating expectations for their children's futures. Parents expected that the investment into their children's education would provide a return in economic, social, and cultural forms. The study also took place when the class system in China was undergoing a dramatic restructuring process. Parents' anxieties and hopes for their children's futures were explained by a global 'logic of modernisation'. By having high aspirations for their children's education, parents 'invested in the hope that modernisation would propel them and their society to the top of the global hierarchy' (2004, p. 182). She proposed that these parents held a cultural model that was a mixture of the traditional Chinese emphasis on education, the empowerment of women, the democratisation of the Communist revolution, and the meritocratic ideologies of the capitalist world system that promised upward mobility for all (2004, p. 101).

The participants in Fong's research did not experience the smooth transition of wealth and social status from one generation to another. As a result, they generally held upbeat attitudes compared with those living in entrenched social inequality in the West (2004b, p. 102). Fong found a 'poor but hard work' ethic in the cultural model among the parents in her study where children of the non-elite tended to be even more ambitious and achieve

better scores in senior secondary schools. However, my research data throws doubt on whether the 'poor but hard work' ethic still predominates parents' parenting logic in today's China. Even though the assessment of education still emphasised academic achievement, parents' investment in various enrichment classes and academic enhancement sessions could greatly enhance children's performance, whereas 'poor but hard work' may not be enough for a successful result in education. Parents' material investment in education mattered more in China's 'new era' than in Fong's research in the early years of the 21st century (see section 6.3.2).

The highly ambitious and well-educated single child grew up and inherited the cultural model of modernity. Many of them actualised their aspirations and ambitions, became parents, and developed even bigger hopes, though sometimes with contradictions, for their children. Thus my research, in some sense, was a continuous endeavour to examine these singleton parents' educational hopes in China's 'new era'.

3.3.2 Love's Uncertainty: The Politics and Ethics of Child Rearing in Contemporary China

If Fong's research (2004) took place when many of the Chinese urban dwellers were still struggling with material constraints, the study presented in this section begins to focus on the country's burgeoning middle class. Using an ethnography and textual analysis in the mid-2000s in a southwestern city, Kuan (2015) ambitiously combined in her study official policies, popular newspapers and magazines, and parenting advice books with interviews of parents and other education stakeholders, as well as observations in classrooms. She focused on middle-class families with children in primary and secondary schools. Her definition of 'middle-class' families in China was quite elusive, and was mainly based on her speculation and observation of the families' consumption patterns.

Kuan put forward her framework of the 'art of disposition' as an attempt, with an anthropological perspective, to link the Foucauldian framework of governmentality with parents' agency and life management. 'Art of disposition' meant that parents would dispose of the right dose of investment in their children's lives. On top of the grander discourses, it was the day to day life choices parents had to make that shaped their children's futures. She termed the 'art of disposition' as 'a moral practice that simultaneously recognises the embedment of human activity while locating opportunities for strategic manipulation'

(Kuan, 2015, p. 36). Kuan used the 'art of disposition' to make sense of the moral and practical dilemma faced in Chinese parents' day to day life. They had to cope with the ambiguities of raising competitive children while attending to their physiological wellbeing and cultivating creative minds. During the process, parents were required to continually evaluate the extent and manner of their involvement (2015).

In her research, Kuan also used indigenous Chinese concepts to understand China's unique social, political, and cultural environment, which shaped Chinese parents' perspectives toward education. *Guan* was one of the concepts (Kuan, 2015). It is used to describe the control exercised by parents onto their children in China. Other researcher attributed the concept of *guan* to the Confucian tradition that the proper supervision of children's behaviour was necessary and was, therefore, the parents' responsibility and obligation (M.-Y. Wu, 2013). *Guan* was similar to the notions of 'governing', 'supervising', and 'taking responsibility' in English. However, it did not value personal independence in the parent-child relationship as parents in the Western context did; rather, it emphasised people's interdependence. It required parents' devotion of time and energy into their children's development to cultivate their subjectivities and make them competitive in the job market. For parents, they had the moral obligation to practice the 'art of disposition' to create the proper conditions to secure their children's education and career prospects. Through this process, parents could manage the uncertainties faced in their children's future.

Kuan in some sense continued the research of Fong (2004b) in exploring the implications of the one child policy. Her ethnographic study in Kunming found that a parent had to strike a delicate balance between 'raising a child who could compete in an intensely rigorous education system and respecting her child as an autonomous subject' (2015, p. 13). These two discourses always contradicted each other. In her research, among the fierce competitions in students, schools, and between parents, there was also a reflection on the impacts of competition on children's wellbeing. Kuan (2015) also noticed a problematisation of parental behaviour. Parents were encouraged to adjust their parenting approach and use the market to solve problems in education process. Kuan's research set up a good example to link the grand discourse of the national and international level to parents' day-to-day experience.

3.3.3 *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*

Why did parents display anxiety towards their children's education in Kuan's study (2015)?

The answer may lie in the educational desire proposed by Andrew Kipnis (2011a). Andrew Kipnis is prolific in the study of Chinese parents' practices and perspectives. In his book, *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*, he combined Foucauldian traditions in governing and an anthropological perspective on culture to situate Chinese parents' educational pursuits and desires in local, national, and global contexts (2011a). He developed his ideas on *suzhi* (Kipnis, 2006, 2007) and exemplified the cultural, historical, and political roots of the notion in a small county in Shandong, the birthplace of Confucius. I will return to his work later during the discussion of *suzhi* in sections 3.5.1–3.5.2.

In the previous sections, I summarised some key studies on Chinese parents. Those works provided invaluable insights. The cultural model of modernity by Fong (2004) linked parents' aspirations with the grand discourse of national development in China. It demonstrated how to associate parents' mundane, day to day educational choices with policies and social values. The 'art of disposition' by Kuan (2015) provided a good example of generating conceptions from parents' day-to-day educational practices that was rooted in the local cultural and political context. The development of *suzhi* (which I will discuss in more detail in section 3.5.1 and 3.5.2) provides a tool to link the buzzword with the complexities of Chinese educational reform. However, there are limitations with those studies. For example, they mainly focused on parents with school-aged children and they were carried out more than ten or even twenty years ago (Kuan's 2015 published work was actually conducted about ten years earlier). How will parents in contemporary China, branded as the country's 'new era', make sense of EYE? Specifically, how will parents' wide use of WeChat impact their perspectives towards education? How will the increased material conditions change Chinese parents' educational views and practices? What does the deepening engagement with the Western countries imply in Chinese parents' views towards education? These studies prompt questions such as these, but whereas the authors drew on methodologies that required their participation in family lives, I employ a non-intrusive approach using social media to establish a different dynamic in the research process.

3.3.4 *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*

In this section, I will go beyond the ethnographic study on China and review a study undertaken in the American context, as it provides an important framework to understand parents' engagement in their children's education around the world. Annette Lareau (2003) conducted in-depth observations in twelve American families with mainly third-graders in primary schools. These families all had different socioeconomic resources at their disposal. Based on their different parenting and education approaches, Lareau put forward the famous categorisation of parenting approaches – 'concerted cultivation' and 'the accomplishment of natural growth' – to make sense of parenting and education practices in the American middle- and working-classes. She found that parents of different social class backgrounds tended to employ differentiated parenting strategies. American middle-class families, regardless of their racial background, tended to employ the concerted cultivation approach. Parents would schedule their children for various organised activities and extracurricular classes. Additionally, parents liked to reason with their children and used fewer directive words. When dealing with educational specialists, parents adopting concerted cultivation were usually more assertive and were ready to defend and promote their children's rights and interests. By having their spare and leisure time filled with structured and usually fee-paying activities, children of middle-class families were familiarised with the middle-class work and life routines and gained advantages in later education.

The working-class parents, on the other hand, were more inclined to adopt the parenting approach of the accomplishment of natural growth. They tended to have less structured activities for their children, and they were given considerable time for spontaneous play with neighbours and relatives with limited parental intervention. When dealing with their children, these parents were more likely to use directives and acted in a more authoritarian way. These parents interacted less with educators and, when they had to, tended to be more constrained. Compared with their middle-class counterparts, working-class parents were not so competent at playing by the rules to get the best benefits for their children.

Despite the similarly high aspirations for their children's educational success and well-being, the middle-class parents' approach to educational involvement was usually favoured by the

educational institutions over that of working-class parents. Influenced by Pierre Bourdieu (2010; 1990), Lareau (2003) argued that the differentiated parental practices among working- and middle-class children further led to the reproduction of social classes and division. By conducting concerted cultivation, middle-class families instilled middle-class value systems, and passed on their cultural assets to their children; while by upholding the accomplishment of natural growth, working-class parents transferred a set of values and skills that were useful in working-class life, but that may have encountered problems in the middle-class dominated educational institutions.

Lareau's study has significantly shaped the way researchers conceptualise parents' involvement in their children's educational activities. Lareau revisited the families and conducted a follow-up study a decade later (2011) to trace the life trajectory and achievements of the families and children who were vividly represented in the first edition of her book. Through the in-depth interviews with the informants, Lareau was determined to find out if the differences of children's achievements, related with the different parenting approaches across the social classes, would persist or diminish. In the second edition of her classic research, Lareau also recorded the families' reactions and attitudes towards their portrayals in her initial research about a decade ago. Despite some families' confusion about and rejection of their socioeconomic positions in her book, Lareau insisted that the families social class positions tended to be transferred to the next generation through various factors including the parents' involvement in their children's education. In the study, Lareau called on researchers to

pay more attention to the crucial role of middle-class parents' informal knowledge of how institutions work; the educational, economic, and social resources they bring to bear in order to realise their goals; and the countless individually insignificant but cumulatively advantageous interventions on behalf of their children these parents make over time. (2011, p. 306)

Even though Lareau claimed that both concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth offered some benefits for children, she affirmed that middle-class parents who practised concerted cultivation would be more likely to raise children in a stronger position to possess social, economic, and cultural resources in their adult lives (Lareau, 2011, p. 241). When the children became adults, those who were brought up by a concerted

cultivation approach seemed to have better job prospects and a more comfortable life than those raised by the accomplishment of natural growth.

In Lareau's research, the broad standard of the guidelines on parenting formed a dominant set of cultural repertoires, which was endorsed by a group of experts and professionals with primarily middle-class backgrounds (Lareau, 2011, p. 4). In the digital age, where parents have much broader access to educational information and can participate in a variety of different ways, I am interested to explore if parents take more initiative and are ready to take more responsibility for their children's education. My research also investigated, through social media in the Chinese context, whether the demarcation of concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth worked in the same way as in the US context (see section 6.4 and section 6.5).

3.4 Educational market, out-of-school classes, parents' choices and anxieties

The previous key works and authors provided many insights for my current study. In this section, I will address the impacts and implications of neoliberal logic in education. This is an important feature of Chinese education in this 'new era' that the key ethnographic works in the previous sections have not discussed. I will describe how the role of parents has been shaped by market logic, especially in the area of out-of-school classes. I will also describe how parents are subject to the pressures of choice making and how that produces anxiety for parents.

In Lareau's study (2003) above, parents' endeavours in their children's education were conceptualised as a way to reproduce their social class positions. In this section, I will examine the existing literature that saw parents as consumers in the educational market. This section is continuous with the previous section as it shares the view that parents' mundane, day-to-day lives embody their socioeconomic status and ends up influencing their educational expectations and consumption practices (Choi, 2016; Lareau, 2003, 2011). In the WeChat group, educational services were held as a commodity to be purchased on the market (see section 6.4.2 discussing how material constraints prevented Luli from further

using the educational service online). What these parents in the Little MBA WeChat group were experiencing and the suggestions they were giving to their peers had an implicit consensus that parents had to pay extra money in order to get the desired educational service (see Chapter 6 on *ke wai ban*). This section will examine parents' consumption and parenting practices in the educational market to better understand their educational views.

In contemporary society, parents can pursue educational excellence and fill their children's leisure time with fee-paying educational activities. By exercising their freedom of choice in the market, parents can remedy the problems of formal state education (Lareau, 2011; Martens, 2005; Vincent & Ball, 2006, 2007; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). On the one hand, the market gives parents and individual families the freedom to pursue educational ideals according to individualised agendas and criteria (Martens, 2005); on the other hand, the market facilitates class division and satisfies middle-class parents' imperative to solidify their preferential class positions, which meanwhile causes anxiety and pressure for parents (Leyton & Rojas, 2017; Vincent & Ball, 2007).

Choi (2016) conducted ethnographic research with nine families in Hong Kong across different social classes. She focused on the families' leisure and play-related sessions, and tried to find out how the parents would support their children's learning and development through these sessions. The parents' socioeconomic resources were found to fundamentally influence their expectations and the way they involved themselves in their children's play and learning. Parents with better financial and cultural resources could translate their resources into educational advantages as they guaranteed that parents could use multiple tools and approaches to address and remedy the perceived failures of the broader education system. The author argued that now that local education had shifted towards a set of neoliberal values such as entrepreneurship, problem-solving, and communication skills, children who had the chance to practice them, mainly from middle-class families, could be further advantaged in the life-long learning journey.

Neoliberal values in the Chinese context are relevant to the *suzhi* discourse. According to Kipnis (2007), neoliberalism in China fits the governmentality theorists' interpretation of the neoliberal governance which produces disciplined, law-abiding, autonomous

citizens/subjects in the political sense (also see Anagnost, 2004), who are also entrepreneurial and over-achieving in the economic sense.

A critical part of parents' educational expenditure takes place out-of-school. From the US to the UK, to as far east as China, out-of-school enrichment activities seemed to be increasingly prevalent in parents' efforts to guarantee a favourable social class for their children in the contemporary world (Choi, 2016; Crabb, 2010; Veeck, Flurry, & Jiang, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2006; Vincent & Ball, 2007). Based on in-depth semi-structured interviews in 59 families across two middle-class areas in London, Vincent and Ball (2007) studied English parents' willingness to engage their children in paid tuition to enhance their opportunities. Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical focus on taste (1984), they affirmed the role of various enrichment educational classes in maintaining, strengthening, and challenging the existing boundaries and the stratification of social classes. Involvement in extracurricular activities, continuously being held as an important indicator of good parenting, was strategically used by the English parents to 'make up' the middle-class. While widely consistent with Lareau (2003)'s study, they also noticed intra-class differences where richer, upper middle-class parents tended to invest more in their children's extracurricular activities than the other professional middle-class parents, largely due to their stronger financial capabilities (Vincent & Ball, 2006; Vincent & Ball, 2007).

Even though the enrichment activities were not necessarily academically oriented, they nevertheless supplemented and prepared children's formal learning by providing them with more diffuse benefits (Vincent & Ball, 2007). In China, the enrichment classes also constituted an important marker of parents' commitment to their children's education, as was the case in England. In the Little MBA WeChat group, the link between enrichment class participation and academic advantages grew even stronger. Children's involvement could bring practical benefits to their schooling and widen their access to high-quality educational resources in the long-term educational project (see Chapter 6.2).

Erdreich and Golden (2017) critiqued researchers' dominant reliance on Bourdieu's framework of social class in studies of parenting. Based on research in an Israeli school, they argued that to have a meaningful discussion of parents' involvement in school, researchers

had be aware of the process of how culture is defined and shaped, and how it curtailed parents' engagement with education. Their work pushed me to consider Chinese culture as an important factor in explaining parents' views and practices.

The work of transferring the out-of-school educational provisions into a tangible educational benefit is, however, not gender-neutral. Rather, it has been largely shouldered by mothers. In fact, the cultivation of children's interests is also coined as 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996). By judging the proper 'taste' (like taste in arts), picking up the right services, and attending and monitoring children's learning, mothers converted economic capital into the cultural and symbolic capital that is used as the marker of social stratification (Erdreich & Golden, 2017; Golden & Erdreich, 2014; Leyton & Rojas, 2017; Vincent & Ball, 2006). I argue that the gender-specific role of mothers in the process of 'making up' middle-class children through enrichment activities was present in my research as well. Even though gender is not my focus, I am fully aware of the existing gap in the input between fathers and mothers towards the cultivation of their children's tastes and education achievements. In the digital age with the extensive use of social media, mothers still take up much of the parenting work that is supposed to be shared by both genders. Therefore, future research needs to re-examine the gendered parenting work in the digital age and how it is represented in social media.

One of the consequences of the marketisation of education is the increasing pressure parents have to bear to raise their children. In the educational market, parents are required to make choices and they are positioned 'as consumers and investors'; they are expected to use 'standardised instruments as technologies for valuation, accountability, and punishment'; and parents who are subject to this mechanism have to 'engage in a disciplining and anxious instrumental rationality as they search for a school' (Leyton & Rojas, 2017, p. 558). This phenomenon results in widespread anxiety in child-rearing practices in contemporary society. For each of the choices parents make for their children's education, they have to calculate its value and risks. And once the decision is made, they have to bear the responsibility of it.

Parents' anxiety, arising from the neoliberal logic of competition and market, seems to be widespread over the world (Angus, 2013; Tan, 2017a, 2017b). The neoliberal logic of education shares a consensus that on the one hand, 'schools and other providers of services are expected to be responsive to market discipline and to adopt an enterprising approach by anticipating and satisfying the expectations of education consumers' (Angus, 2013, p. 396); on the other hand, parents, as consumers, are held responsible for maximising their children's gains and benefits through the choice-making mechanism. Especially for middle-class parents, they have to constantly make choices to cement and strengthen their class positions (Angus, 2012, 2013; X. Wu, 2011; Yoon & Gulson, 2010).

Educational advice for parents from popular experts is increasingly blurred with advertising in the educational market (Vincent & Ball, 2007). The popular advice was used by parents to support their children's self-making. Self-making is the process where children use various resources to grow, develop various dispositions and become themselves. This process is not easy for parents, as shown by the discussion of the 'art of disposition' proposed by Kuan (2015) in the previous section; parents have to regularly examine and monitor their practices to suit their children's specific conditions. They have to produce the 'cultural capital in the right composition, of the right volume, with the right knowledge in the right way' (Skeggs, 2004, p. 136). Parents need to constantly calibrate the extent, direction, and manner of their parenting practice. All of the demand becomes a source of parents' anxiety. Parents worry that improper, 'wrong' choices would not only bring severe consequences to their child's educational performance but would also endanger the family's social position and degrade their offspring as the abject and devalued working-class 'other' (Leyton & Rojas, 2017).

The existing literature studying parents in the education market focused more on the consequences of their practices. Few studies delved into parents' decision-making processes and looked at the nuances of parents' experience, positions, and mechanisms to manage their educational concerns in their encounters with the education market. In particular, there is a lack of research studying how Chinese parents in early years education perceive the implication of neoliberal logic in the education market. Neoliberal logic was expressed in

Chinese education in an uneasy mixture of conflicting values, embodied in the national *suzhi* educational reform that I will describe in detail in the next section.

3.5 *Suzhi* and Chinese early years education

Suzhi, which can be broadly translated as human quality, has been a prominent notion in Chinese society since the 1980s (D. Lin, 2017) and has become a popular buzzword that is used in both everyday life and academic discussion. In her book, Kuan described how the idea of *suzhi* education first appeared in several government policies and then gradually made its way into popular culture and day to day use (2015, pp. 60-65). Since the 1990s, *suzhi jiaoyu*, or ‘education for quality’, has been advocated in Chinese education as a goal as well as a means of reform to raise the *suzhi* of the country’s young citizens and subsequently improve the entire population’s quality (D. Lin, 2017; Tan, 2017a). It is such a popular word that according to the study conducted by Lin (2017), at the climax of its use in 2000, 20% of the entire published works in the education and sociology fields contained *suzhi* as a theme.

3.5.1 *Suzhi* in Chinese EYE

The idea of *suzhi* has been left intentionally ambiguous and vague by the government so that it leaves enough space for people to interpret it (Tan, 2016). Furthermore, the scope and definition of *suzhi* are dynamic and are changing with the socioeconomic development in China. The measurement of *suzhi* is aligned with the entire national education program, which is ‘almost everywhere openly and officially stratified’ (Liang, 2016, p. 162). *Suzhi* has increasingly become a concept that covers a wide repertoire of character and skills. It is now a measurable concept which can be used to measure the immeasurable human quality (Kipnis, 2007). Though the meaning of *suzhi* lacks specificity (Woronov, 2009), as a measurable concept, a high *suzhi* person is expected to have a better academic record, behave more morally, and possess a broader range of different skills, compared with a low *suzhi* person. As a result, being a high *suzhi* person becomes both the standard, as well as the product, of a good education, which can lead to a good job and a successful life in the future (Fong, 2004b; Kipnis, 2011a).

In the EYE context, a typical high *suzhi* child resides in a middle-class family in an urban area, is well-rounded with various talents, performs well academically, and is also expected to be

creative and entrepreneurial. As part of the urban elite, these high *suzhi* children attend various extracurricular learning programs in sports, arts, and other sessions that enhance their overall education performance (Anagnost, 2004; Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Jacka, 2009; Kipnis, 2006, 2011b; D. Lin, 2017; B. Wu & Devine, 2017).

The measurable *suzhi* has been used in China with a 'sacred' overtone to demarcate people in China's highly stratified hierarchy system (Anagnost, 2004; Kipnis, 2006; J. Wu, 2012). People of high *suzhi* are positioned higher in the social hierarchy compared with those of low *suzhi*. Raising children's *suzhi* via education has been gradually accepted as a national strategy to achieve modernisation and global respect, which is disseminated through experts' advice, media coverage, and educational and eugenic policies (Woronov, 2009). Since the 1990s, *suzhi* discourse has been incorporated into China's educational reform agenda, which aims to change China's intensely academic focused education and cultivate students' overall abilities (Tan, 2017a). Parents' aspirations, responsibilities, and strategies for education have all been shaped accordingly. Two decades after the launch of the *suzhi* education campaign, the notion of *suzhi* for the parents in the WeChat group has only become more complicated, but it is still influencing parents' perception of their children's education.

Various factors are working to influence the idea of *suzhi*. Firstly, *suzhi* is deeply rooted in the Chinese traditions of self-cultivation (Kipnis, 2011a; D. Lin, 2017); it is also influenced by the neoliberal logic and its associated values (Kipnis, 2007; Tan, 2017a). *Suzhi* has been mandated by the government as well. Notably, the birth control policy implemented since the 1980s has dramatically shaped Chinese parents' aspirations and views towards children's education. The government's use of *suzhi*, therefore, reflects its changing population policy (Kipnis, 2006; D. Lin, 2017) not only emphasising control of the quantity of the population but also improving its overall quality under the slogan *yousheng youyu*, which means superior birth and superior education (Kipnis, 2006). Thus, *suzhi* becomes a powerful language, with a strong government-endorsed policy, that translates the country's governing of its citizens into everyday educational practice. As the *suzhi* education campaign goes hand in hand with the birth control policy in the governing of the Chinese population, researchers have argued that the translation of *suzhi* education as 'education for quality'

was problematic, as it was not the quality of education that was most at stake but the quality of the entire population (Kipnis, 2006).

3.5.2 *Suzhi* and Confucianism

Confucianism is held by researchers to have a close relationship with the idea of *suzhi* (Kipnis, 2011a; D. Lin, 2017). Mistakenly, some people take it for granted that Confucianism is the ideas of Confucius (551–479 BC). In fact, many of the ideas proposed by Confucius had long existed in ancient China. Confucius was born in a time of chaos where different states were at war with each other and ordinary people suffered miserably. As a descendant of an aristocratic family, he aimed to restore social order by teaching people good values and virtues that had been lost over time. He travelled to the different Chinese states to introduce his ideas and taught students from various walks of life. These followers of Confucius took notes of Confucius' teachings and compiled a book named *Analects*, which became the most important Confucian classic in history. Mencius (372–289 BC) followed and further developed Confucius' ideas. After that, this set of ideas was interpreted by different scholars and officials, and was gradually named Confucianism, which was later accepted as the ruling ideology of the following dynasties in ancient China (D. Lin, 2017, pp. 19-24).

Confucianism encourages people to practise self-cultivation in order to reach the perfect moral state. Confucius was an agnostic. He neither admitted nor denied the existence of God. For him, the first and foremost priority for human beings was to learn to be human. The view of humanity in Confucianism can be roughly classified into the following categories: *Ren* (benevolence), *Yi* (righteousness), *Li* (courteousness), *Zhi* (wisdom), and *Xiao* (filial piety) (Huang, 2012; Yim, Lee, & Ebbeck, 2011).

Ren (benevolence) is an ideal of moral perfectionism which includes the acts that benefit humans and can bring people together; *Yi* (righteousness) is another standard for human behaviour that requires people to act according to the rule of morality of faithfulness; *Li* (courteousness) emphasises people's proper behaviour based on their positions, ranks and interrelatedness in society; *Zhi* (wisdom) refers to people's knowledge and reasoning; *Xiao* (filial piety) requires people to respect, love and care for parents, grandparents, and other elders in society (Yim et al., 2011). These all have had huge influence on Chinese people's

perspectives on parenting and education throughout history. Parents' educational behaviour for their children entailed moral reciprocity. They fulfil their responsibility while expecting children to practice filial piety in return.

According to Huang (2012), the *ren-yi-li* are interrelated aspects of Confucianism that collectively make up the ethical system in Chinese culture. One should love people (*ren*) and behave in accordance with the right rules (*yi*). In order to give *ren* to all people, humans should behave and express *ren* according to people's different positions and ranks in society and relations with them (*li*); among all the relations people set up with others, the most basic and important relation is the one with their parents and grandparents, showing love and respect to them is the prerequisite to showing *ren* to others (*xiao*); in order to understand morality and ethics, one must have wisdom (*zhi*).

The entire system of Confucianism constitutes a self-cultivation system for Chinese people. Today, Confucianism has been internalised in Chinese people's minds and practices. The self-achievement made by self-cultivation has also inspired China's long-cherished meritocracy (B. Wu & Devine, 2017), which has been achieved by the imperial exam of *keju* and the modern exam system, as a means to select the elites in China (see sections 2.1, 2.3 and 7.3).

The influences of Confucianism and its call for people's self-cultivation through education penetrate every aspect of Chinese people's day to day life. By comparing with other influential traditional Chinese philosophies, Lin concluded that 'the Confucian conception of a perfect and complete human nature is also the direct common thread that runs through Confucianism and contemporary political thinking represented by *suzhi*' (2017, p. 28). In understanding the Chinese parents' educational desires in Zouping, a small county in Shandong province where Confucius was born, Andrew Kipnis argued,

[The influences of Confucianism ranged] from ideas of self-cultivation to teaching techniques; from aesthetic judgments about the beauty and emotional resonances of calligraphy, artwork, poetry, prose, and, indeed, all forms of cultural expression to the procedures by which social hierarchies are constituted and the moral logic by which they are justified and legitimated; and, above all, from teaching or

education in a narrow formal sense to governing — the conduct of human conduct — in the broadest sense of the term. (2011a, p. 90)

Some of the values desired by Confucianism, for example hard work, self-cultivation, discipline, and conformity, constitute the key parts of children's *suzhi*. Confucianism also inspires and motivates Chinese children and parents to long for self-improvement by learning and aiming towards high *suzhi*. Indeed, Confucianism constitutes an essential source of *suzhi*.

3.5.3 Contradictions and dilemmas: the success and failure of *suzhi*

Suzhi is also significantly influenced by neoliberal values. As discussed in section 3.3, both children and parents are expected to make the right choices in the educational market as consumers. At the same time, however, children are not expected to embrace the entirety of market logic, as the government also encourages children to demonstrate discipline, diligence, and loyalty to the Party-state and other socialist values (Woronov, 2009). This is especially true for middle-class parents, who have to make a judgment about the right amount of neoliberal values to exercise, and practice the 'art of disposition' (Kuan, 2015) discussed previously in this chapter. In order to foster high *suzhi* children, it is essential for parents to critically embrace the neoliberal values and search for the right combinations of skills and dispositions that can be traded in the job market (Cheng, 2016). Kipnis focused on educational reform and claimed that the *suzhi* centred education reforms were arenas where the Foucauldian theme of subjectification was explicitly shown; *suzhi* also answered the questions as to what the ideal subjects/citizens education wanted to produce. In order to produce governable citizens, the government has to use techniques in the subjectification process, through a stratified education system and an ideology-laden curriculum and pedagogy. He found that the neoliberal discourses coexisted with the authoritarian discourse in governing Chinese education (Kipnis, 2011a, 2011b).

Andrew Kipnis (2011b) tried to understand the use of *suzhi* by the government from a Foucauldian perspective. For him, the *suzhi* education was a way for the government to produce governable subjects and 'responsibilise' its citizens into autonomous, entrepreneurial, democratic, law-abiding individuals who would hold themselves accountable for their own welfare and well-being. He also found that under the banner of *suzhi* education, the coexistence of authoritarian and neoliberal discourses, from the

contents to the pedagogy of education, had led to inconsistent and complex subjectivities, which was termed by him as 'an explicit contradiction between the "authoritarian" and "liberal" aspects of education for quality' (2011b, p. 295). In his book *Governing educational desire: culture, politics, and schooling in China* (2011a), Kipnis discussed how 'teachers, education researchers, and government bureaucrats argue endlessly over how to induce students to grow into patriotic, creative, "high quality", entrepreneurial, responsible, moral, intelligent, and adaptable adults as well as over which of these qualities is most important' (Kipnis, 2011a, p. 6). His works laid the foundation to understanding the complex nature of *suzhi* education.

Therefore, *suzhi* is by no means a coherent and straightforward notion. There are inherent ambiguities and conflicts within it. After summarising the development of the notion of *suzhi* since the 1980s, D. Lin (2017) claimed that *suzhi* education was 'a word that succeeded and a policy that failed' (p. 134). An important reason for this was its inherent conflicting ideas and values (Kipnis, 2011b). Analysing the official document of the Chinese government's promotion of *suzhi* education, Kuan claimed that for the *suzhi* notion,

[The] tensions are inherent, as the documents are responding to and acting within a complex historical situation: the Party-state's legitimacy rests on economic success, which in turn rests on opening up to the world and increasing the country's store of human capital. To maintain the former while promoting the latter is a tricky matter. (2015, p. 56)

In her analysis, she called for a detailed and specific understanding of the complexities of the policy's historical and social context.

Woronov (2009) analysed the competing and contradictory messages in morality, one of the most prominent aspects of *suzhi* education. She argued that *suzhi* implicated an inherent tension within contemporary Chinese ideologies. Studying *suzhi* opened a window for her to understand 'how to link the next generation with the nation's past, yet prepare them for the future'. She said,

These tensions – between past and future, between a theory of moral child rearing and its actual practice, between collectivist and individualist ideals, and between exhortations to consume more and the moral ambiguities of excessive consumption – highlight the contradictory ways both the state and the market are

working to produce children as moral subjects suitable for the nation's future.
(2009, p. 570)

To address the inconsistencies, researchers brought about the idea of a 'double bind' to make sense of how parents were caught between the conflicting value systems (Bach & Christensen, 2017; Sum, 2018) where children were required to be creative, entrepreneurial, and spontaneous, and in the meantime were expected to be obedient, disciplined, and prudent.

In this section, I discussed the development of the notion of *suzhi*. I demonstrated how it was influenced by Confucian traditions, neoliberal values, and government policies and discussed its ambiguities and contradictions. Chinese parents' views towards EYE were to a large extent influenced by *suzhi*, which I will come back to in the main chapters (see chapter 7).

3.6 Social media, WeChat and parenting

WeChat is a form of social media that gains increasing popularity in China. Chinese users of WeChat reported that WeChat was their preferred form of social media in terms of the frequency of use, daily time spent on the platform, and almost all other user participation and engagement metrics (Moon, Mathews, Oden & Carlin, 2019; Lien and Cao, 2014; Xie, Putrevu & Linder, 2017). Since its launch in 2011, WeChat has seen a rapid increase of its users. By March 2018, WeChat had more than one billion daily active users and 94.5% of Chinese internet users are active WeChat users (Wang, Zhang & Zeng, 2019).

WeChat has changed the way people communicate with each other (Lien and Cao, 2014) and has been the primary communication tool among young and educated people in China (Chen, Fei, Sun & Amran, 2017; Gan, 2017). One of the reasons for its success is attributed to its understanding and appreciation of the Chinese culture. WeChat has gradually incorporated a variety of functions that are embedded into Chinese people's life. Indeed, it is now an all-round platform which integrates communication, payment, entertainment, social media and other different functions. It allows people to connect their offline and online activities in one platform (Wang, Zhang & Zeng, 2019). With WeChat gaining increasing popularity in China, researchers have now begun to pay attention to it (Chen, Fei, Sun & Amran, 2017; Gan, 2017; Lien and Cao, 2014; Moon, Mathews, Oden & Carlin, 2019).

For example, Gan (2017) delved into WeChat users' liking behaviour. The author conducted an empirical study among 215 WeChat users. Based on gratification theory, she found that there were three kinds of gratification affecting users' liking behavior including hedonic gratification (enjoyment), social gratification (social support) and utilitarian gratification (information seeking). This is consistent with my study. By joining the WeChat group, parents can not only receive emotional support from others in a similar context but also gain useful educational information. This echoes parents, especially mothers, in the Western context who seek support in Facebook and other social media to discuss, seek support and disseminate information on parenting and health issues (Baker, Sanders, & Morawska, 2017; Haslam, Tee & Baker, 2017). This is also reflected in the 'mommy blogs' where mothers used website forums to exchange information on issues like vaccination and other health issues (Moon, Mathews, Oden & Carlin, 2019).

There are different ways for parents to get involved in education via social media. Parents can join a group with a specific topic, they can comment and like other people's contents or they can simply lurk and gather information that is useful for them (Haslam, Tee & Baker, 2017). This is in line with the way parents participated in my research, where parents formed a parenting group with some parents lurking and others being more active (see section 4.6).

Using the internet to seek parenting and education guidance and support is widely practiced by parents in the US and Australia (Haslam, Tee & Baker, 2017; Moon, Mathews, Oden & Carlin, 2019). This is especially true for new parents who don't have previous parenting experience. The recent development of social media and its apps in portable mobile devices, including mobile phones, has made seeking support via social media increasingly accessible (Haslam, Tee & Baker, 2017). In Australia, 75% of people aged 18–29 and 66% of people aged 30–39 use social media frequently, most of whom are of childbearing age (Sensis, 2016). Other research conducted in the US found that half of its respondents stated that they used social media to acquire parenting information in the past month (Moon, Mathews, Oden & Carlin, 2019).

Baker, Sanders, & Morawska (2017) found that parents who turn to social media tended to be young females who are not in work and spend extended time online. Higher-risks families were not associated with the use of social media. Instead, in Radey and Randolp (2009)'s research, they found that parents with higher education level, together with those who were unmarried, younger females, were more likely to use online information as a source of parenting information.

Moon, Mathews, Oden & Carlin's (2019) found that most parents who used social media stated that it was a useful tool to get parenting information. Compared with traditional information resources of education and health issues i.e. families, friends or other professionals, social media provided a platform where parents could discuss issues in an anonymous, comfortable and flexible environment. Parents, especially mothers, found that the information on social media was more trustworthy than from professionals because the other members were just like them and had more empathy with their situation. Indeed, social media had persuasive power as the community members tended to believe in the first-hand stories told by other members.

This does not mean that social media is problem free. Compared with traditional sources of parenting information, social media does not have a mechanism to control its quality. Many of the guidance in social media is non-evidenced and can be even detrimental to children's growth and health (Haslam, Tee & Baker, 2017).

3.7 Conclusion

The existing literature provided invaluable insights into understanding parents' views and practices. However, there are also a few gaps that my research can contribute to. First, methodologically, previous studies employed researchers' questionnaires, observations or interviews to generate data. Many of the researchers came to the participants' lives from higher socioeconomic positions. When they landed in a corner of China, one or two decades ago, trying to befriend the local parents and children, they were very likely to be positioned as 'outsiders' in a higher position. Unfortunately, few of them reflected upon this or took effective procedures to avoid it in their research.

In my study, I took advantage of parents' natural conversations and activities in the WeChat group and was able to interpret the natural data with relatively less influence and bias caused by the unbalanced power dynamic between the researchers and the participants. Second, participant-wise, previous studies on Chinese parents' views seemed to rely on data from parents with predominantly older children. They did not shed light on how parents of early years children perceive education and how they understand their roles in the process. Thus, in my study I focused on a group dominated by parents of early years children to understand their perspectives. Third, even though previous research also used a wide range of textual materials including newspapers, magazines, and popular books, these materials were usually not part of the researched setting but were brought in by researchers. In this study, the various online posts were not external resources but were an integral part of the WeChat group contents and were discussed by the parents. Therefore, analysing the textual materials is part of the process to understand the parents. Fourth, the existing research on Chinese parents mostly took place at least ten years ago. Currently, the economic, social, political, and technological contexts have all evolved in 'new era' in which China has undergone transformative changes during the past decade. Its growing middle-class, including the WeChat parents, has become assertive, powerful, and affluent. How the parents are responding to the new context and updating their parenting strategies needs to be understood. My research looked at how they were making their educational choices with more economic, social, and cultural resources at their disposal and how they responded to changing material conditions.

With this literature review, I aimed to provide the relevant studies to establish my niche and contextualise my research in the academic field. Together with Chapter 2, it further justifies the necessity of conducting the current study. In the next chapter, I focus on the methodology and methods of the research.

Chapter 4

Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 are dedicated to the discussion of methodology and the methods of this study. Chapter 4 mainly focuses on the discussion of methodology and it will set up the principle theory and rationale of employing ethnographies in the research design, while Chapter 5 will detail the specific methods employed and exemplify how the data was collected, analysed, and presented to answer the research questions proposed in Chapter 1. Before that, I will first use this chapter to have a general discussion of the choice of ethnography and introduce the overall design of the intra-sited ethnography, a research design which was built on the specific features of WeChat. Then I will move to the discussions of how this study intends to re-conceptualise some notions of ethnography, brought about by the incorporation of social media into the educational research landscape.

Social media has become a subset of virtual communities. In this research, social media refers to ‘networked communication platforms that are organised around interlinked user profiles of pages, [which] depend on users to create content or share media, and articulate participants’ “social network”’ (kraemer, 2016, p. 90). According to this definition, WeChat is a typical social media platform as it allows users to create different profiles, share, and link various sources of contents. Despite the potential social media has provided for social researchers, it was not until recent years that ethnographers started to tap the potential of its use in social research (Baker, 2013). In my study, the design and implementation of the research were closely embedded in the characteristics of WeChat as a social media platform.

4.2 Overall design: intra-sited ethnography in WeChat

The research questions⁷ proposed in the first chapter were formulated as a result of my interest in parents' interaction within the Little MBA WeChat group. WeChat was the platform that contextualised the parents' activities. Therefore, the research questions could hardly be taken out of the context of the specific WeChat group and the WeChat platform in general. The specific research questions were formulated during my immersion in the group, as an observer who was interested in parents' views and perspectives of EYE (see section 1.4). The research methods were accordingly developed in order to suit the dynamic of the group and the design of WeChat but, as a relatively new phenomenon, WeChat in China had rarely been used in educational study. Therefore, the design of the research intended to tap its features and functions to answer the research questions and pioneered the methods that could be applied to other educational research with the use of the social media. In my research design, I tried to uncover the specific characteristics of WeChat and its participants, and use it as the context for this study.

With these factors in mind, I designed the intra-sited ethnography approach. I used the name 'intra-sited ethnography' to highlight the fact that all the data of the research was collected within the different functions of the single platform of WeChat. The data included the textual conversations in the WeChat group, posts shared in the group (which were mainly textual but also included emoji and pictures to aid the delivery of the meaning), and audio call interviews using the WeChat audio call function. This ethnographic approach of interrogation using different functions within a single social media site was named intra-sited ethnography. Unlike multi-sited ethnographic studies, the various features of WeChat were organically built within the platform. In the discussion of the methods, I will further justify the use of the intra-sited ethnography by detailing the specific methods and WeChat functions I used as part of the data collection procedures and data analysis strategy. Before that, I will explain why I turned to ethnography.

⁷ The research questions are: What are parents' views about current EYE practice in China? What do parents' views reveal about their aspirations for EYE? What are their understandings of the role of parenting in EYE?

4.3 Why ethnography?

The overall design of the research was deeply influenced by ethnographic theories and practice. First, ethnography allows me to look at the unique features of the virtual parent community of Little MBA. Ethnography studies a group of people, race, or community. As its name suggests, ethnography writes and presents (-graphy) the cultures, rituals, and life of a human group (ethno-). It originated from the anthropological tradition and had a history of studying the practices of people 'far away' who were the non-Western 'others' (usually less developed and 'exotic') (Draper, 2015). Gradually, it focused its lens on the Western, local phenomenon ranging from street violence to professionals' identity as well as educational practice. In the contemporary world, the virtual community found on the Internet has also become the focus of ethnographers (see later discussion in section 4.4 on virtual ethnography). The Little MBA group was a virtual community which could be explored using ethnography as: a) the group members had something in common – the pursuit of their children's educational excellence; and b) this virtual group of parents differed from other parents as they had explicitly expressed their identity as parents who were in favour of values like entrepreneurship and creativity, as the name Little MBA had indicated (Cohen, 1985; DeDominicis, 2016).

Secondly, ethnography permits a certain level of flexibility for researchers to take full consideration of the uniqueness of the research context. This means that while ethnography traditionally depends on participant observation, interviews, and field notes to collect data in one field for an extended time (Hartas, 2010), it can also use other available methods and tools, have a shorter duration, and be partially immersed, as long as it can produce data and facilitate the analysis process, shed light into the culture of the group, and answer the research questions (DeDominicis, 2016; Hammersley, 2007). Nowadays, with the increasing use of social media, the homogenisation of ethnography methods has been increasingly criticised (Forsey, Breidenstein, Krüger, and Roch, 2015). This is in line with the criticism that ethnographers focus on participant observation, with other methods being 'add-ons' (Crang, 2007). Indeed, ethnography can use any available methods to understand the meaning-making process of one community and use the available data to write people's stories. What the flexibility of ethnography means for me is that its core focus is on the context and

community, rather than the fixed procedures. This is particularly useful in my research as I can adapt and make use of the features of Little MBA as a WeChat group to answer my research questions. This echoes some researchers' claims that ethnography is more a way of thinking, a system of epistemology, and a dedication to the study of the culture of a group of people in their own terms, rather than a collection of fixed methods (Boellstorff, 2008; DeDominicis, 2016; Hammersley, 2007).

Third, I employed ethnography as it allowed me to get thick data, delve deep into the meaning-making process and think broadly in a naturalistic setting to acquire in-depth knowledge (Walford, 2008). As an ethnographic researcher, I could live everyday life like the members of the community, rather than construct artificial conditions to elicit data (Delamont, 2007; Hammersley, 2007). This meant that I could adopt an unobtrusive approach to collecting the data to preserve the natural setting of the WeChat group and to respect and understand the group's specific features (Agar, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008; Hammersley, 2007), dwelling on the parents' natural habitat in the social media group. I relied on the mainly textual information in the group and audio call interviews as the most prominent way to get access to data. Familiarisation with the group settings and the study of the parents' subjectivities helped develop my 'local understanding' (DeDominicis, 2016).

Fourthly, ethnographers can assume the role of insiders and outsiders at the same time. Ethnographic researchers need to go deep into the community, develop local understanding of the people, activities and environment, and produce an insightfulness of the culture of the community; but ethnographers are also empowered to get away from the familiarity, stand back, and challenge what is taken for granted. Indeed, ethnographic research can give researchers a chance to estrange themselves from the familiar and equip them with a unique lens to see the world. By doing so, researchers can challenge their pre-made assumptions (Walford, 2008), and realise the tensions, ambivalences, and disoriented situations (Walford, 2008; W. J. Wilson & Chaddha, 2009). In my context, using ethnography meant I could navigate between my role as a researcher who aimed to make sense of the parents' activities, and a group member who was interested in learning more from the other members.

Furthermore, ethnography does not seek to eliminate the researchers' voices. Rather, researchers themselves can be the research instrument as ethnography is usually interpretative and does not seek to be objective (Walford, 2008): researchers acknowledge the influence of their own bias, values, experience, and backgrounds on data collecting, analysing, and interpreting processes. Therefore, reflexivity is encouraged for ethnographers who strive for insightful research (Delamont, 2007; Hammersley, 2007). Researchers have to be aware of how their engagement, participation, and (in)visibility in the group are (re)shaping the group's dynamic which can be regarded as a resource for writing, analysis, and reflection. Also, researchers can retrospect, reflect, and utilise themselves in the research process and be reflexive of the embodied knowledge they have gained from their life experience (Coffey, 1999; Collins & Gallinat, 2010). In my research, the reflexive element of ethnography in a virtual environment was particularly useful. It legitimised my own thinking and presence in the data generation and analysis process, and allowed me to have space to imagine, interpret, and speculate about the informants who could be thousands of miles away from me (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992; DeDominicis, 2016; Delamont, 2007). As a result, reflexivity should not be regarded as an add-on but was a necessary part of the process.

Above are the rationales of choosing an ethnographic approach for my study. These features of ethnography can translate into the process of answering the research questions. The use of ethnography was suitable for the study of a natural virtual community, with parents voluntarily joining for the common concern of their children's education. It brought a flexible approach to collecting data from parents and conveniently assisted the preservation, restoration, and tracking of information. By reading how the parents, who were naturally attracted by the group's education-oriented activities, lived their online lives and fulfilled their roles as their children's primary educators and guardians, I was provided with opportunities to delve into their EYE-related beliefs, interests, and concerns. All the information was produced and demonstrated in an unobtrusive online setting in WeChat.

4.4 Doing ethnography in social media

Contemporary ethnography has increasingly seen social media included in the research landscape. Social media in ethnography can become a communicative medium, a data archive, and a research context at the same time (Baker, 2013). With the widespread adoption of social media in people's communication, it has become common practice for people to form various virtual communities in social media and, as many people's vital way to communicate and interact with others, a space for ethnographers to examine and study (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Madianou, 2015; Postill & Pink, 2012). In the virtual space, ethnographers are enabled to travel through space and time to reach and understand people far away (Forsey et al., 2015). It opens up a new space to understand people's interaction and behaviours (Shumar & Madison, 2013; Underberg, 2013). WeChat has become a common platform for Chinese people from various walks of life to interact and communicate with others (Sun, 2016). It enables users to form groups out of common interests and open up many different channels for them to communicate, share, and produce information. Despite its potential for generating a large amount of data, few studies in the field of education have so far utilised it either as an educational research instrument or as a research site, leaving it relatively unexamined despite its prevalence in people's daily lives.

There are a variety of different names given to ethnography carried out on online activities, such as 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000), 'multi-sited ethnography' (Hine, 2007) or 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2009). They are in contrast to traditional ethnography which focuses mainly on offline life where people's online existence is pushed to the periphery. Beneito-Montagut (2011) further distinguishes online ethnography that focuses on the online context – like online gaming ethnography – and those works that include online ethnography as an extension of real life experiences, which she calls 'expanded ethnography'. The key principles in traditional ethnography also apply to virtual ethnography (Hine, 2008). It requests researchers to closely engage with the research settings, either overtly or covertly, over an extended period, and be reflexive of their own roles in the research process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2010). In this way, they can understand what would be otherwise taken for granted (Harrington, 2000; Hine, 2008).

Researchers can employ participant observation, textual analysis, interviews, surveys, and other available tools to collect and analyse the data (N. Baym, 1998). Despite the similarities, ethnography in the online context entails unique circumstances and conditions which require discussion in today's increasingly mobile and globalised world. In their innovative research, Forsey et al. (2015) selected a virtual forum as their research field to see how globally mobile parents chose schools for their children in Germany. As an untraditional ethnographic work, researchers were not physically present with the informants in the research site. Nor did they have intimate contacts with informants as ethnographers are normally expected to, but the research still generated rich and insightful data. In my case, I followed the offline and virtual ethnography tradition and used many available tools, made possible by WeChat, to collect and analyse a group of parents' views towards their children's education in a WeChat group. The settings, participants, and methods were all inspired by the specifics of WeChat.

Indeed, conducting ethnography research in the contemporary world can mean that researchers have to deal with the 'multi-sited' and 'global' issues which characterise the interconnected world. Additionally, the site for ethnography has shifted from a 'tent in a village' where people were bound to a permanent site to 'a hotel lobby' where different people keep on coming and then moving away from the research sites (Forsey, 2015). For example, users can decide when to join and when to exit social media groups, so their membership can be highly fluid. The 'come and move away' nature of contemporary social media apps, as seen in Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter, has tremendously influenced the conduct of research. It poses unprecedented challenges as well as opportunities for researchers to track and follow the participants, and calls for an updated ethical discussion for online researchers. With the proliferation of methods used in ethnography, the idea of sites has also been reconstructed by recent ethnographers. Research sites are increasingly regarded as processes linking multiple places rather than a single fixed locality, producing the so-called 'non-local ethnography' (Feldman, 2011). This is also in line with the intra-sited ethnography that I proposed at the beginning of the chapter, where the different functions and territories of a single media app were used to produce and collect data. The current study dwelled on the various functions of WeChat and they offered me a good level of flexibility by using an assembly of methods to collect and analyse the data.

Researchers have also talked about the possibility of crossing the online and offline boundaries in ethnographic research. In today's world, separating people's online life from their offline world can be artificial, as they both constitute people's real-life landscapes. Hallett and Barber (2014), who used to be 'traditional ethnographers' but have increasingly understood the necessity of including online spaces in informants' 'natural habitats', argued that,

with the advent and proliferation of the Internet, people now occupy online as well as physical 'habitats', and these spaces have become essential for the creation and reproduction of relationships, identities, and social locations. However, the bulk of traditional ethnographers in the twenty-first century often overlook the importance of online spaces in the lived experience and thus miss data that could help them more fully understand the populations they study. (p.307)

For some researchers, combining virtual interaction with physical, face-to-face communications can be a useful way to corroborate online data (Hine, 2008; Paccagnella, 1997). Furthermore, it is believed that integration of the online and offline world together can add to in-depth knowledge of the informants and contribute to a rich and comprehensive understanding of the informants' lives (B. Wilson, 2006). In virtual ethnography, where texts are the predominant form of information, researchers can engage with the producers of the texts offline to re-check and re-examine the meanings they have constructed online. Other researchers have argued that the textual data in social media itself is valuable and does not need to be verified in offline contexts at all. For example, DeDominicis (2016) claimed that the online texts alone constituted an important source of knowledge and experience. By analysing the composed stories and the exchange of interpersonal experiences, researchers can still establish the meanings of the informants' reality. The textual data should not be regarded as factual but should be treated as valuable subjective data.

In phase one of my research, I collected data online in the WeChat parent group of little MBA. In this phase, I regarded parents' messages, mainly textual, as the main set of data. I did not pursue the factual accuracy of the claims parents made in the group. Their textual conversations would not be held as 'facts' but would be treated as the collectively constructed subjective and local meaning and stories, which is the core of ethnography

(DeDominicis, 2016). Therefore, verification of parents' claims made in the WeChat group would not be my aim and was also less salient compared with the discourses they represented. In phase two, I conducted interviews with eight informants, using the voice call function of WeChat to follow up the emerging themes in phase one in order to deepen the understanding of the data. I did not recruit too many interviewees in order to prioritise depth and details. I wanted to extract stories that were hidden behind the narratives in the WeChat group conversations and make the untold stories explicit. Therefore, interviews were used in phase two to complement the data collected in the WeChat group. The overall design of the methods was to best utilise social media to generate data from parents that was difficult to produce in other contexts.

4.5 Re-conceptualisation of sites, multi-presence and 'imaginative engagement'

In traditional ethnography, research sites are usually can be fixed physical settings like villages, classrooms, schools, or neighbourhoods (Fong, 2004b; Heath, 1982; Mead, 1943). With the increasing expansion of computer-mediated communication into our daily life, the notion of research sites in ethnography has to be reconstructed (Baker, 2013). Online space is no more 'the periphery of life' (Hallett & Barber, 2014). Instead, in many cases, it plays a central role in life – and ethnographers have to consider the features of participation in the online context. In studying the ethnography carried out on Facebook, Piacenti, Rivas, and Garrett (2014) claimed that in social media as a research space, '(t)he traditional structuralist dualities of researcher-researched, observer-observed, object-subject, rational-irrational, freewill-determinism, and formal science-informal lifeworld can be weakened' (p, 226).

The introduction of social media as the research site challenged the traditional notion of sites in two ways. Firstly, the incorporation of the virtual territory into the study of people's life creates a picture of contemporary life, which should not be neglected in contemporary ethnography (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004a; Orgad, 2009; B. Wilson, 2006). Secondly, attention should be paid to the uniqueness of the online site. We should not simplify the understanding of the online site and equate it with an extension or add-on of traditional

physical locality. Instead, we have to get a full understanding of the affordances and potentiality of it. The idea of presence in one single site at one given time is challenged and redefined by the arrival of social media (Piacenti et al., 2014), which can link different physical localities and gather people from different places all together in a virtual space.

The multi-presence results in a different dynamic in data production and collection, which inevitably impacts on researchers' experience, perceptions, and views towards the data. Thus, the effects of multi-presence should be made more explicit rather than implicit. For example, while I was looking at the parents' interaction in the WeChat Little MBA group, I was being exposed to various layers of information. There were various apps installed which were also functioning alongside the WeChat application (see Figure 4.1). Sometimes, I might be looking at a parent's complaint about the expense of her child's EYE while noticing a post popping up about the competition on high-quality education resources. The two separate sets of information might have had an impact on how I perceived and analysed each one. Also, sometimes when I was observing and analysing the data, I could use the hyperlinks or search functions of WeChat to be in different sites at the same time.

Apart from the ethnographers themselves, multi-presence can have an impact on the informants as well. Researchers should be aware that during the time of data production in virtual ethnography, informants may be exposed to many different layers of activities embedded within each other. Therefore, the data ethnographers collect from the informants in virtual ethnography can be incomplete, in the sense that it would be impossible for ethnographers to have access to the other dimensions of informants' presence. Specifically, in my research, the different layers of meaning-making and contexts the informants were exposed to might include different windows opened in the same mobile phone along with the WeChat parents' group. It was impossible to establish the complete digital and real-life context when parents were present in many different sites at any given time so I needed to recognise the incomplete nature of ethnography involving social media and could only focus on how the textual script has created attitudes, views, norms, and beliefs. Accordingly, I designed a second step of audio call interviews to supplement the data in the parents' group and tried to contextualise parents' conversations.



(Figure 4.1 Being at multiple sites. A WeChat user is present at the same time on many different online sites, including Facebook and Safari)

In order to address the multi-presence, I argue that researchers who adopt online ethnography as part of or the whole of their research design should recognise the ‘imaginative engagement’. In my research it is an approach to address multi-presence in virtual ethnography. It is about being aware that both ethnographers themselves and the informants are exposed and influenced by various layers of contexts, and it would be misleading to claim that group members are living under a unified, single site. It is a recognition of the imaginative enterprise of virtual ethnography in the relationship researchers established with data, context, and informants (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992; DeDominicis, 2016; Delamont, 2007). This means that in virtual ethnography, ethnographers should distinguish what the explicit meaning expressed in the group is and what are the inferences that are ‘imagined’, based on the information in the group.

The explicit confession and clarification of the influence of the ‘imaginative engagement’ is in line with the reflexive nature of ethnographic work, which requires researchers to use themselves as a tool in the construction of meanings. As Collins and Gallinat (2010) critique in their analysis of the role of self in ethnography, self is ‘multiple, socially embedded and

emergent, and thoroughly implicated in processes of learning, becoming, experiencing and remembering' and as researchers, 'we do not write down every fieldwork experience – just imagine trying to do so – but rather carry much of that experience around with us as “head-note”'(p14). The 'imaginative enterprise' constitutes part of the 'head-notes' researchers carry when collecting and analysing the data. In my research, even though my data was retrievable due to the nature of WeChat, I constantly reminded myself of the fact that these participants were subject to different layers of information. Only by recognition of that could I understand the limitations of the data.

I was made aware of the 'imaginative engagement' as an important element for my analysis and writing and as a way to address the limitation that I did not personally meet the informants in the offline context. In the writing process, the vast majority of the information I could get from WeChat was in the form of textual dialogue (sometimes with the aid of emoji). However, it would be messy and incomplete if I presented the entire data using the original conversations. Often, I needed to transform the conversations into more descriptive data. That was where the imaginative engagement would be required. I needed to tell complete stories from the conversations, dialogues, monologues, and emotions as well as my inferences based on the texts, emoji, and pictures. Therefore, 'imaginative engagement' signified honouring the mutual embeddedness of social media and people's day to day life in the contemporary world, and respecting people's multi-presence. Through the recognition and articulation of the new normal of people's life, researchers can actively contribute to the production of consistent data and can address the limitations brought by the lack of offline, face-to-face encounters.

The multi-presence and imaginative enterprise of ethnography have implications for my research. As the design of methodology and methods of ethnography with social media should consider the unique and specific features of the platform, in my study I analysed WeChat and its functions and tried to understand the nature of the site and its associated affordances for data collection and analysis. I found that WeChat provided several mutually embedded functions within the same platform. From Figure 4.2, it can be seen that during a given period of time, people can talk with several people, read articles, check others' messages, and purchase goods and services. All these actions can take place within the

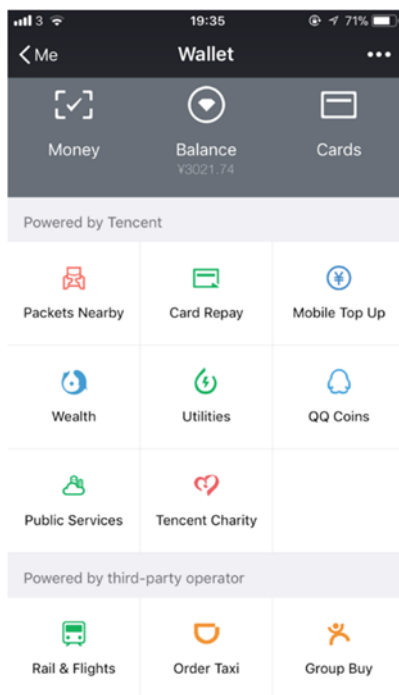
single site of WeChat at roughly the same time. Regarding the 'imaginative engagement', if WeChat users befriend each other in the platform, they can even check others' personal lives, interests, and educational claims via the storyline of people's published posts.

However, access to personal information is highly asymmetrical in social media. By setting up one's privacy options, WeChat users can take control of their level of exposure to others. Figure 4.3 shows how WeChat users can personalise the extent of their openness to others. It can be seen that users can choose whether or not to show their Moment (similar to the 'Wall' of Facebook) to others; whether strangers can read 10 of their posts in the Moment; or whether only posts made in the past 6 months or 3 days are available for others to view. In the ethics discussion in section 5.3, I will elaborate on how I utilised the exposure options to enable group members to see my posts, in order for them to be made aware of me, my presence, and the research.

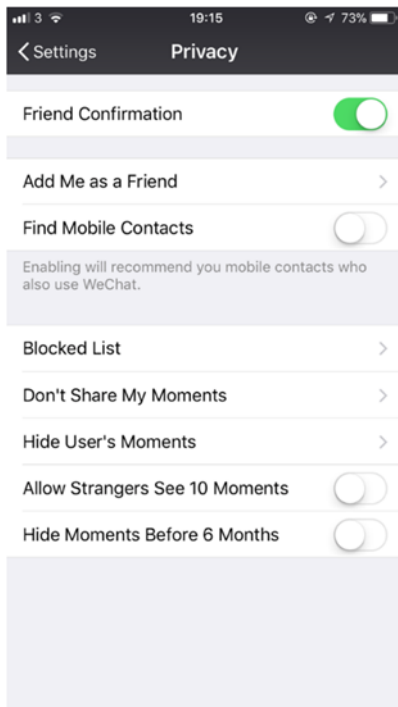
Another feature of WeChat that demonstrates multi-presence is the posts shared in the group. Their influence, embodied in *liuliang*, or the number of readers, can be of paramount importance for WeChat users. *Liuliang*, or volume in English, is a phrase in WeChat and other social media in China that is used to calculate the number of users or readers of specific posts. It can be seen by every reader in the bottom-left corner of WeChat posts, and has become a benchmark to predict and evaluate the impacts of posts. The contents of the posts are not only a means for personal expression that discloses a user's beliefs, identity, and aspirations, but also influence the readers' views and perspectives online. The posts are personal because individual users have the power to choose whether or not to post anything and what to post. However, their posts, or sharing of the posts, can also reflect the collective pursuits of the community. Some posts which attract a large readership can be highly influential and have substantial social impacts. And more importantly, the readership can be quantified in WeChat through the quantifiable *liuliang*, which makes its influence even more visible.

In this Little MBA group, some posts shared by parents were specifically drafted to address EYE problems, and were an influential source of information that affected the opinions of parents (see Figure 4.4 for example). Indeed, some posts were so influential that parents in

the WeChat group not only read and espoused their views but also brought the views to the group space for discussion. This could be an unconscious and unnoticed way for parents to exert their influence on each other. Sometimes, it could also be a source of pressure. To recognise the peer pressure within the group was to recognise that the platform was not merely for the parents to voice their concerns and self-expression, but also exposed parents to others' influence. On the one hand, social media like WeChat seems to have broken up traditional hierarchy and made it easier for different opinions, other than those of experts, to be heard by others; on the other hand, it has established a new regime that impacts public opinions. High *liuliang* posts often exert a more considerable influence on people's minds than those of lower *liuliang*. These dominating views can infiltrate a specific WeChat group or influence an individual member. They are also a relevant component of the information used in my study (see example in section 8.2 for the discussion of Western education).



(Figure 4.2 A selection of functions enabled by WeChat)



(Figure 4.3 Users personalise their privacy options. They can limit the exposure of private information to others)



(Figure 4.4 Parent's WeChat posts with educational components. The titles of the posts shared by this parent are as follows: 08 Jan, 'seeing the world on parents' shoulders, joining the Big V shop and having a higher ground for your child.'; 07 Jan, 'help the naughty children get to know their temper, parents can get help from picture books.', 'Yu Minhong: families that practice reading are beautiful'. All these posts were shared in the WeChat Moment by one parent in the group)

To understand the methodology, one needs to be familiar with the site. The above analysis is to help promote the understanding of the methodology and how the features of WeChat were conceptualised in the design of the research process. Through the discussion of the multi-presence nature of WeChat, I argue that WeChat as a site is by no means neutral and static. Rather, it is actively exerting influence on researchers and the informants during the

data collection and analysis process. Therefore, researchers need to employ 'imaginative engagement' as a way to deal with their relationship with data, context, and informants.

4.6 Re-conceptualisation of participation

One prominent feature of traditional ethnography is that researchers actively participate in the community they study (Delamont, 2007; Hammersley, 2007). When ethnographers in traditional ethnography are present in the site with their informants, they usually acknowledge their presence and the associated influence. Normally, they can be physically seen on site and actively participate in the community in one way or another. The idea of participation means that ethnographers themselves are also the co-constructors of the meaning-making process in the community and are involved in the community's activities (Hammersley, 2007). In virtual ethnography, however, participants and ethnographers are sometimes invisible from each other: participants, as well as researchers, may create avatars to communicate in the virtual space to represent their identities. The conventional way to understand participation should be reconceptualised in this new context. Some researchers doing virtual ethnography have even challenged the necessity of explicit participation, claiming that the researchers' presence would interrupt the natural data. Boellstorff (2008) mainly relied on unsolicited data as the major source of information to study the virtual community in the online game group Second Life. Delamont (2007) used the unsolicited, natural textual data to study the phenomenon of fandom. Compared with the traditional ethnographic studies, these works in virtual contexts have raised questions for conventional conceptions of participation and for the associated ethical considerations.

One way to think about this phenomenon is lurking⁸, which is a common practice in social media. In the WeChat group I studied, there were almost 500 parent members at its peak. However, those who kept active throughout the duration of my participation were estimated to account for around only 10% of the WeChat group members. The majority of the group were participating on a limited scale, and indeed, many of them were lurking. These people seldom took part in the group discussion, nor did they raise any questions or

⁸ Lurking is a practice on the internet. People who lurk read discussions, messages and conversations but rarely take part in them.

share anything with other group members. In traditional research, these people might be defined as non-active or non-participating at all. However, I argue that in an online context, specifically in WeChat, lurking can be active, too. People who lurked in my group might still be actively involved in the meaning-making process by using various functions of WeChat. For example, they could ‘like’ an article that was shared in the group, without necessarily exposing their identity to others in the process at all (see Figure 4.5). Clicking likes can enhance the *liuliang* or volume of the readers, which boosts the visibility, credibility, and popularity of the posts. As argued before, by having a high *liuliang*, some posts in WeChat can be more influential in WeChat and beyond. Clicking likes, therefore, is not merely an expression of attitudes or agreement but also makes a difference to others’ opinions. It should be seen as a way of making a contribution and having an impact, without necessarily generating verbal information.



(Figure 4.5 Clicking likes. Friends can press like to support the posts without making any concrete verbal comments)

The informants of the WeChat group could participate in a way that was different from traditional ethnography. Sometimes, the informants only made a limited number of contributions to the group conversation, but still influenced its flow. In this sense, participation in WeChat should not be judged on the countable or tangible words informants typed, or the posts they shared. Participation in social media can take place in an intangible way, which includes participating by lurking, liking, and sharing. In conclusion, the

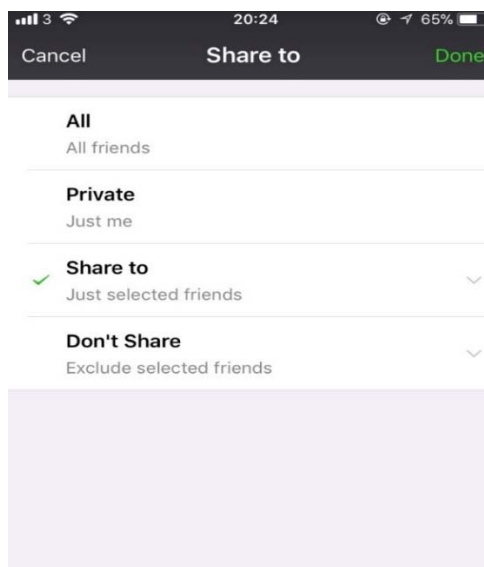
nature of social media, WeChat in particular, requires a re-conceptualisation of participation.

The changing notion of participation not only influences the conceptualisation of informants' activities but also has implications on the role of researchers. Even though participant observation is one of the core features of traditional ethnography, virtual ethnographers sometimes choose to maintain a low profile in the research process to avoid interrupting the natural ecology of the virtual group (DeDominicis, 2016). In a WeChat group, the space for discussion is mainly restricted to the flow of the conversation in the mobile phone screen, and so any of the researchers' information would be automatically stored and disseminated in the group. Therefore, if the ethnographers ask too many questions or impose too much of their personal views, it will inevitably influence the natural dynamics of the group. Compared with traditional offline ethnography where ethnographers are expected to participate in a tangible way, the researcher's involvement in a WeChat group may result in the imposition of their views, especially if they are deemed as an authority in the field. In my case, as I disclosed myself as a researcher in a prestigious university in the UK as part of the ethics arrangement to inform the participants of my activities and background, some of them considered me as someone who could provide them with the 'right answer'. For example, after I made the disclosure, I received several requests asking me to comment on their educational practices. To address the issues, I adopted a strategy where I would minimise my impacts on the conversations in the WeChat group. I realised that for WeChat, where people's textual information in the group was the most important source of data, my participation would risk intruding on and influencing the community. If ethnography is about studying the culture of a particular group, then I needed to minimise my own impacts in the group and maximise its natural flow and authenticity.

4.7 Re-conceptualisation of private and public space: individualised privacy

Another change brought by the adoption of social media and WeChat in ethnography is the need for the re-conceptualisation of the private and public space. In online ethnography, the boundary between private and public spaces has become increasingly blurred and complicated (Maranto & Barton, 2010). I argue that the research in WeChat led to what I

call 'individualised privacy'. It was based on the fact that in WeChat, an individual WeChat user was enabled to define and customise his/her settings. WeChat users could choose to what extent they wanted to disclose their private information and to a large extent define and control their own private space. For example, WeChat users could use different aliases in different group settings and set up their privacy preferences based on their personal preferences. There were also options available in WeChat for users to choose who could see what information. For each post, users could customise the targeted audience, from visible to authors only, to visible to a selected group of friends, to open to all (See Figure 4.6).



(Figure 4.6 Personalising privacy. Users can personalise their privacy settings for the information they post in WeChat)

As WeChat gives flexibility for its users to define their own privacy, it was common in the Little MBA WeChat group for different users to apply completely different levels of openness to their information. For example, with some parents in the study, I could not access their personal posts in Moment at all. With others, I could only read their recent posts. And with some, I could read all of their posts without being friends. By actively choosing to open and block access to their own information in WeChat, users of WeChat were actively exercising their individualised privacy. The individualised privacy implies that the scope and definition of private space and territory have to be reconstructed. The demarcation between the public and private space does not apply to the virtual context. Furthermore, the boundary between the public and private space should not be deemed as static and universal, but should be negotiated, contextualised, and seen as complex and dynamic.

Following on from what was discussed above, the scope of the private space in a WeChat group depends on how the individual user defines and constructs it, rather than being imposed solely by the established norms. In my context, people used WeChat to engage with their familiar friends, acquaintances, and strangers at the same time. Sometimes, it was difficult to judge whether a particular post which people shared was meant to be public or private as the boundaries were in constant flux, depending on the specific user in a specific context. For example, without first becoming friends, a stranger in WeChat could barely chat with me or use the one-to-one chatting function. Nor could they comment on my posts. However, in WeChat groups, people can still talk to each other and share information and views in the group discussion, regardless of whether they are online friends or not. However, their one-to-one conversations in the public space will be viewed by all the group members. Thus, WeChat creates tunnels that a user can use to switch between the private and public space within a single research site. In the WeChat group sites in my research, membership was open to the public, and all members' communication, sharing, and comments were entirely visible to others without the need to first befriend each other. In this sense, the WeChat group can be seen as a public setting. The reconceptualisation of the private and public space will have significant implications on the ethics discussion on ethnography research using social media. The ethical challenges incurred have no established solutions and no easy answers, as shown here and in section 5.3.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter deals with the theoretical discussion of the methodology of the research. Inspired by ethnographic traditions, I tried to (re)conceptualise some notions of ethnography and adapt them to my study. I introduced the nature and characteristics of ethnography and ethnography in social media to establish the rationale of the research design of intra-sited ethnography. I also worked on the key notions like research sites, multi-presence, participation, and private and public spaces to demonstrate the unique affordances brought by the use of WeChat and the potential contributions it could make in ethnographic education research in social media.

Chapter 5

Research methods

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, I discussed theoretical perspectives on the methodology and the reconceptualisation of some key notions of ethnography. In this chapter, I will explain the detailed procedures used to answer the research questions. Based on the methodological discussions in the previous chapter, this chapter explains how the data was collected, analysed, and presented. As the design of the research methods was based on the unique features of WeChat and ethnography, I will discuss how the use of WeChat has influenced the specific methods used.

5.2 Research procedures

In this section, I provide details of the data sampling, collection, and analysis process. The specific procedures and decisions were informed by the theoretical discussion in the previous chapter. I will first give information on how and from whom the research data was collected. Then I will give information on how the data were coded and organised in order to achieve comprehensive and deeper understanding.

5.2.1 Sampling

Previous research on WeChat mainly recruited its participants by random, convenience sampling via website (Wang, Nie, Li, & Zhou, 2018; Gan, 2016;), or convenience sampling (Chen, Fei, Sun & Amran, 2017) or stratified sampling offline (Wang, Zhang, & Zeng, 2019). Also, researchers studied parenting practice via Facebook used quantitative methods of survey with qualitative interviews (Moon, Mathews, Oden & Carlin, 2019). As far as I'm aware, there are currently few qualitative, ethnographic approaches to studying parents in a natural setting in WeChat. This ethnographic study was conducted in a WeChat group which I joined in China in the summer of 2014. WeChat in China has become an important arena for Chinese people to narrate events, express hopes, and negotiate identities (Sun, 2016). In order to protect the privacy of the platform, the WeChat group was given the pseudonym of

Little MBA, keeping the core meaning of the group's original name. As suggested by its name, the group shared a sense of neoliberal values; what brought the parents together was their common pursuit for educational qualities like entrepreneurship and creativity that children needed for a perceived successful career in the globalised world. Their topics reflected the agenda of China's determination to integrate into the global market and eventually realise its 'Chinese dream' of national rejuvenation in China's 'new era' (see section 1.2 for the unique contribution this group brought to the study). In daily practice, its topics covered a much broader spectrum of educational issues. Little MBA was mainly comprised of Chinese parents from various locations who shared a common interest in their children's education, as well as other educational stakeholders such as teachers.

Compared with other parent groups in WeChat, Little MBA had a large number of community members (at the peak it had nearly 500 members which was the maximum number for a regular WeChat group). Though some members were mainly lurking, about ten percent of the parents had been quite actively involved in initiating topics, sharing information, and exchanging opinions among themselves. The scope of the discussions was often open and wide, addressing a diverse range of educational, and sometimes non-educational, issues. For example, parents might start a conversation on selecting an appropriate English class and end up discussing a celebrity scandal. Additionally, rules had been negotiated and set up in this group so that most irrelevant information, for example, commercial advertisements, would be quickly removed.

Due to the informal, fluid nature of the WeChat group and the non-intrusive nature of this virtual ethnography research, it was impossible to obtain the same level of demographic data as researchers do in an offline context. However, there were some clues that I could draw on. Parents in this group were encouraged to change their group alias as 'name-location –children's age' (for example, a parent's group alias could be 'Jack-with-a-6-year-old daughter in Beijing'). Even though not all of the parents followed the suggestion, it did provide some information for about 70% of the active parents of my research. About two thirds of the active responds resided in economically more developed areas including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong and Zhejiang provinces. The age span of these parents' children was around four to eight, which roughly fell into the early years stage of children's

education, including preschools and the early stages of primary schools. However, it was not uncommon to see some parents in the group whose children's ages were beyond this range. It meant that while the group mainly involved parents of early years children, it naturally attracted a wider group of parents whose children's ages went beyond the artificial age divisions made by the educational institutions. The age span of these parents' children was around four to eight, which roughly fell into the early years stage of children's education, including preschools and the early stages of primary schools. However, it was not uncommon to see some parents in the group whose children's ages were beyond this range. It meant that while the group was mainly attended by parents of early years children, it naturally attracted a wider group of parents whose children's ages went beyond the artificial age divisions made by the educational institutions. For those parents whose children were a bit older or younger, it was decided that they would not be ruled out of the research, in order to keep the conversations and activities of the group as natural and intact as possible. Below, I will further explain the rationale of including the wider age span. The boundary between preschools and primary schools is blurred in China. Scholars in China have long been discussing the 'primary schoolisation' of preschools, where academic pressure from schools was passed down to preschools (M. Pan, 2015) (also see section 2.1.1).

Furthermore, as a modern Western invention, the idea of the demarcation between preschools and primary schools was only introduced to and practiced in China after the 19th century. Long before that, *mengxue*, a Confucian style institution, was the form of EYE (see section 2.1.1) which was practiced by those families who could afford it (Zhao & Zhang, 2014). There was no age specification for *mengxue*, which could span from four to ten, or older. For many parents, the contemporary age division between preschools and primaries, which is six or seven in China, is an alien notion that was only introduced in China from the West in the last century. As a result, Chinese parents might not be able to see as many institutional differences between preschools and primary schools as their Western counterparts do.

Both preschools and primary schools in China share a common pressure for academic excellence. Many Chinese parents expect their children, both in preschools and in primary

schools, to learn literacy and numeracy, and to be self-disciplined (Fong, 2004; Kipnis, 2011a; Kuan, 2015). In fact, curriculum reforms in both preschools and primary schools have been challenged because of heavy academic burdens and both have experienced tensions between the Western idea of children-centeredness and the Confucian ideals of discipline and obedience. Their common pressure and overemphasis on rote learning have also worried parents regarding both preschools and primary schools. The Little MBA group was formed against this backdrop in order for parents to develop their children's educational performance, which they believed had not been sufficiently cultivated by the current Chinese education system.

The above descriptions discussed the age range of these parents' children, which is key information in traditional research. Normally, researchers will try to achieve a complete record of informants' demographic information, including age and number of informants but this was not always possible for education research on social media. Of the roughly 400 regular informants, some members would leave the group after a certain period of time when they found that the group could no longer meet their needs. Therefore, the total size of the group, despite remaining relatively stable at around 450-480 members, was subject to slight but constant change. It created a certain degree of fluidity which was inevitable and reflected the dynamics of contemporary life. In today's online environment, the stable group of informants typical in ethnography may well only exist in theory rather than in the online reality. Researchers have to realise, embrace, and discuss the uncertainty brought about by online ethnography with social media. I argue that in order to gain a complete sense of the informants' lives, it is necessary to use reasonable 'imaginative engagement' (see section 4.5) in the construction of informants' lives as a methodological necessity.

Even though concrete, specific, and reliable demographic information of each parent in the WeChat group was impossible to establish, from the topics these parents initiated, it was reasonable to make judgements on the characteristics of these parents. It could be inferred that many of the parents in the WeChat group came from burgeoning Chinese middle-class families. This assumption was based on the topics with which parents engaged, which involved attending expensive private schools, overseas educational programs, or various enrichment classes. These parents benefited from China's economic development, and with

their increasing resources they began to exert significant influence on their children's early years education. These parents were aware of Western education ideas and they liked to express their educational desires, views, and aspirations. This was evidenced by the conversations in the group.

Combining different sets of data can add to the depth of this ethnographic research. In this study, a follow-up interview was arranged alongside the WeChat group conversation as a second phase of the data collection. It included eight participants. These participants were purposefully selected from the Little MBA group members during the first phase of the data collection based on the following criteria. First, these eight participants were active participants in the WeChat group. Unlike some other parents who were mainly lurking or quitted the group after a certain period of time, these parents stayed active in the group throughout my research period. Obtaining interview data provided opportunities to further pursue their parenting theories and check what they claimed in the WeChat group. Second, even though absolute representativeness was not pursued in this study, these eight participants were selected to represent different aspects of the informants in the WeChat group. They came from a wide geographical range, located in big cities and small counties in China, to Chinese families based overseas. They had children of different ages and were from different socioeconomic circumstances. Their educational qualifications ranged from Associate's Bachelor to PhD degrees. Selecting parents from different backgrounds helped me to demonstrate different aspects of the group and added to the breadth of the research. For example, there were parents like Luli and Bi who were based in China, and there were also parents like CiCi and Dana who had extensive overseas experience. Some parents had children with little institutional experience (for example Meng) while others' children had already accumulated substantial educational experience. Third, these eight parents all accepted my interview invitation and were interviewed through the voice call function on WeChat. The eight potential parents were approached by me by adding personal contacts and becoming friends on WeChat. After making initial contact, I then explained the research project and the reasons for conducting such interviews with them. As they were aware of my presence in the WeChat group, they were mostly clear what I was doing. I then distributed the consent forms to them and asked them to raise any questions and doubts with me. They all happily gave me consent for the research. Eight interviewees proved to be

a good number as they provided sufficient data to establish the main themes in an ethnography and ensured I could seek depth as my priority rather than width. The demographic information of the interviewees is as follows.

Jane	Aged between 36-40; with average household income above 200,000 RMB (around 22,500 GBP); PhD degree; a mother of a seven-year-old girl. Jane lived in a mega-city in southeast China and had recently transferred her daughter from a public school to a private international school in the hope of a better education.
Luli	Aged between 36-40; with average household income between 60,000 RMB (around 6900 GBP) and 120,000 RMB (around 13,500 GBP); associate bachelor degree; a mother of a seven-year-old girl. She was based in a small town in central China and said that she would like to invest in her child but did not have the same resources as those parents in big cities.
Cici	Aged between 36-40; with average household income above 200,000 RMB (around 22,500 GBP); bachelor degree; a mother of a seven-year-old boy. She was based in Shanghai and had worked for a British company in China. She engaged her child in a wide range of educational opportunities in the UK including educational visits.
Dana	Aged between 30-35; with average household income above 200,000 RMB (around 22,500 GBP); master degree; educational business entrepreneur; a mother of a seven-year-old boy. She was a single mother who set up a small education agency in Australia; one reason for her to emigrate to Australia was to give her child a better start in education. She gained a master degree in Education in Melbourne and was very familiar with Western education. For her, learning from the Western education was not only an educational but also a life and career choice.
Fena	Aged between 36-40; with average household income above 200,000 RMB (around 22,500 GBP); PhD degree. A mother of an eight-year-old boy. A university lecturer in Beijing. She was very relaxed about parenting and education. Her children joined a variety of enrichment classes including swimming, tennis, ping-pong and painting.
Meng	Aged between 30-35; with average household income between 120,000 RMB (around 6900 GBP) and 200,000 RMB (around 22,500 GBP). A mother of a one-year-old boy. Meng was an admin staff at a high school; she was starting to take the child to early learning classes.
Bi	Aged between 30-35; with average household income between 60,000 RMB (around 6900 GBP) and 120,000 RMB (around 13,500 GBP); associate bachelor degree; a mother of a five-year-old boy and a one-year-old girl. She was opposed to children learning too many things at preschool but said she would start to put more on pressure once the children were in third grade.
Fang	Aged between 36-40; with average household income above 200,000 RMB (around 22,500 GBP); master degree; a university lecturer in Beijing. Fang has a five-year-old son. She was based in the UK to work for an academic exchange program in 2016 when interviewed. She noticed a big change for her boy since they moved to the UK and believed that education in the UK made her boy more confident.

(Table 5.1 The demographic information of the interviewees)

Interviews can produce data that cannot be obtained through observation and can also be used to verify the observation data (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). The data from the WeChat parents' group and the voice call interviews were both obtained through the WeChat platform, constituting part of the intra-sited ethnography. The informants had all been anonymised to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

5.2.2 Data collection

As discussed in the previous chapter, I employed intra-sited ethnography and used the various functions of WeChat to produce data. In phase one, I followed the activities of the Little MBA WeChat group for four months. In phase two, I followed up with eight of the parents from the group for voice call interviews, which took place three months later.

Phase one took place from December 2015 to March 2016. The time spanned from term time to the winter holiday and parents' focuses also shifted accordingly with the time. For example, during December and January, parents talked a lot about the exams as it was a time when children were preparing for the end-of-term exams which take place in Chinese schools to evaluate educational outcomes. In late January and February, when the children were already on holiday and the entire family was preparing for Chinese New Year, parents had discussions on teaching Chinese traditions in children's early years education, as well as many intensive discussions about the various out-of-school classes they had registered their children for during the holiday time. In March, parents talked a lot about educational policies (the National Parliament Assembly is usually held in March, leading to many educational policies being published and discussed in the media). In phase one, I intensively observed, recorded, and followed parents' activities and interactions in the group. The information was a form of archived data as it was always retraceable from the social media unless deliberately deleted. Archived data can help construct the specific context of the interaction and establish the mechanism of the information flow (DeDominicis, 2016). As the group members were quite active in discussing, sharing, and conversing during the data collection time, there were some topics and themes which repeatedly appeared within the

period of the research, producing enough data for themes to saturate and emerge. In the summer following my observation of the WeChat group, I selected, contacted, and conducted voice call interviews via WeChat with eight of the parents in the WeChat group. This was phase two of the data collection which started in June and finished in September 2016.

Both the data from the WeChat group in phase one and audio interviews in phase two constituted my database. In phase one, I immersed myself in the group so that I could familiarise myself with the topics and themes of the group. By spending time in the group, I looked at the dynamics of the parents' interaction and studied the topics and themes that had frequently been raised. However, the data in phase one was mainly naturally elicited textual data generated by the informants' spontaneous interactions with other people in the group. In phase two, I took a more proactive approach. In the interviews with the parents, I followed the threads established in phase one, asked them questions, listened to their stories, and constructed a multi-dimensional picture of these parents. In general, phase one of the research focused on the breadth of parents' educational views and perspectives in the WeChat group, whereas in phase two, I paid more attention to the depth. Before the data collection of my study, I had already disclosed myself as a PhD researcher at a UK university and expressed my interest in their contributions to the group.

During the data collection process in phase one, I only had moderate involvement. I decided not to over-participate in the group conversations to avoid diverting the participants and influencing the natural flow of their conversation. The setup of the WeChat platform meant that in the group conversation, the information flowed easily, and every contribution from the group members would occupy a certain space in the group conversation and would be visible to all. I made the decision to keep my presence low key but I still got involved in the group by reading the parents' posts and liking their views, as I have discussed in the re-conceptualisation of participation in section 4.6. From time to time, I would also ask them for clarification and elaboration of the contents I was interested in. For example, when parents were discussing the benefits of Western education, I would ask them what they meant by saying 'Western education'. In phase two, I had prepared a guideline for the semi-structured interview, including both common questions for everyone and specific questions

for individual participants. During the process, I was actively interacting with them and pursuing their opinions.

It was not practical for me to stay in the group every time that conversation took place, as it could happen anytime. However, according to my observations, there were two periods when parents were particularly active. One was from 9 to 11 o'clock in the morning when some full-time stay-at-home mothers had sent their children to either preschool or school. After returning home, they might want to communicate in the group. It might also be a time when they were relatively free before starting to prepare lunch. Another time was usually after dinner in the evening, starting from 8 pm until 11 pm when many parents would have some leisure time after a day's work. During those periods, I would be online and read whatever questions, comments, and statements emerged in the group. For the rest of the day, I was online when I was free and I would also export the information which was mainly textual to a Word document, repeatedly read it, get familiarised with the content, and raise questions to the parents if necessary. While the majority of the data was textual and could be exported first to my university email account, then to a Word document, I also took screenshots, selecting individual pieces of information into the 'favourite' profile of WeChat. These sources of information would later facilitate my data analysis.

One of the features of social media platforms like WeChat is that their information is archived, which by default stores users' activities automatically. Unless deliberately deleted, ethnographers can always trace the texts and engage with them (DeDominicis, 2016). In my case, all of the information in WeChat was re-traceable in the mobile phones of each user. WeChat has a built-in function which ensures the chat history is automatically stored on users' mobile phones, and users can search for specific information by using keywords, dates, or names. Additionally, all the information can be exported to e-mails or be backed up to a computer. I tapped the archiving function of WeChat in the data collection process. At the end of each data collection day, I would re-read and export the data from my mobile phone to my university email before then moving it to a Word document. The following information, however, was filtered:

1. Any commercial information;
2. Information that contained traceable personal information;

3. Information that was sent by robots.

In total, throughout the entire four months of phase one, there were about 9,900 posts, equating 312,000 words of conversations collected. The length of a single post could vary from one single word or emoji to several paragraphs. The virtual ethnography presented different dynamic compared with the traditional research. The data was generated simultaneously from group members who were located in different parts of the world. By the end of the fourth month, there were repeating themes emerging and I made the decision to stop and move to the second phase of the research.

The eight follow-up interviews were conducted based on the themes that emerged in the virtual data collection. The selection criteria of the interviewees were that they had to be representative of some of the conversational threads in phase one, so I could follow them for a deeper understanding. Specifically, before the interviews, I carefully read through the materials collected in phase one, which was also the first round of the analysis process of the ethnographic data. I would note down some prominent themes that repeatedly emerged and the characters who actively articulated their views. At this phase, I not only learnt what had been said and discussed, but also I developed a certain level of understandings of these parents' own theories of parenting and educating their children. After I disclosed my identity as a researcher in the public group space, I added them as my friends on WeChat and sent them the requirement for the interviews.

I used the voice call function of WeChat to contact the parents for the interviews. It was a similar format to a telephone interview, as researchers and participants would not physically meet. When the telephone was introduced to the research landscape, researchers discussed the pros and cons of audio interviews where interviewers were not physically present with interviewees. While personal, face-to-face rapports may be difficult to establish, respondents are more likely to get an undistorted response, especially when the questions are personal and sensitive (Borg, 1989). Based on the emerging topics and themes, I worked out semi-structured interview guidelines of both the general questions that would be asked to all the interviewees, and individualised questions that were designed for each of the participants. These interview questions were all related to the research questions and were designed to explore them from different angles. Before each interview, I

would send a friend request to the targeted parent. As I had disclosed myself in the group as a researcher, the parents I contacted all knew me and accepted my friend invitations. Then I sent them the consent forms in both English and Chinese and told them that I would record their audio interviews. I also employed a digital voice recorder to record the oral interviews. Audio recording made it less distracting for me to alternate between my notes and the participants' responses (Ary et al., 2006).

I had decided that I would empower the participants rather than dominate the interviews so that they could have enough space to talk about their concerns and thoughts (Ary et al., 2006). During the interviews, I sometimes would also ask spontaneous questions in order to probe their answers. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to follow pre-set guidelines and at the same time be spontaneous and flexible. It is especially useful when interviewers can use other research techniques to collect data for one project (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). The semi-structured interviews guidelines only gave me several lines of possibility but were not mechanically followed. After the interview, I would download the recorded conversations in the computer and transcribe them.

5.2.3 Data transcriptions, translation and analysis

Data transcribing is a highly interpretative process which is a fixation of actions and meaning into written form (Riessman, 2008). Arrangement of data transcriptions is not a technical decision but reflects investigators' theoretical commitments and practical constraints. Due to its interpretative nature, transcriptions are 'by definitions incomplete, partial, and selective-constructed by an investigator' (Riessman, 2008, p. 50). Therefore, it is necessary to talk about the complexities of the transcriptions, especially when translation was also involved.

In this research, English was the medium of not only the language of the final thesis but also the medium through which I processed the materials. This meant that transcripts, coding, and writing were all done in English. The reason for that was twofold. Firstly, I recognise what Riessman (2008) called 'language imperialism' in which English influences the academic world from writing, publishing to knowledge exchange. Making English the medium of language could facilitate the knowledge production and exchange process. Second, the decision of making English the medium ensured that the entire process was

coherent and consistent, although it did not mean it was problem-free. Sometimes, the Chinese language had to be used to facilitate the analysis process. For the information that was difficult for immediate translation, I kept the Chinese language in its original form so that when I came back to the materials again, I could process it. Sometimes I would discuss the translation with my Chinese speaking colleagues in the University to make it as faithful as possible. In further analysis, for those words that had specific meaning in their original Chinese form, I would keep them and turn them into *pinyin*, a Latinised form of Chinese writing system used for writing the Chinese language in English. I then exemplified them in more detail for readers to understand. For example, I used the Chinese term *suzhi* throughout to describe a Chinese phenomenon in education, rather than give it a literary, partial translation. Because of the interpretative nature of ethnography, the translation process was also analytical which reflected how I perceived the data.

In the data analysis, I adopted an interpretative and hermeneutic view of the data. This approach considered that different people would have different interpretations of the meanings of data, depending on their backgrounds and contexts. Therefore, the text has many possible interpretations (Patton, 2002). The meaning of the text is negotiated among a community of different interpreters, and from a hermeneutic perspective, a researcher is constructing a 'reality' with his or her interpretations of a text provided by the research; different researchers, with different backgrounds, could come to different conclusions (Check & Schutt, 2012). Therefore, the focus on the analysis is not the verification of the texts but how the meanings are being negotiated in the community and how researchers should interpret and construct the 'reality' from the texts (Check & Schutt, 2012). Therefore, multiple methods were employed in the data analysis process. I used both traditional methods like thematic analysis (Goodrick & Rogers, 2015; Grbich, 2013) as well as experimenting with different methods to exploit the functions of WeChat. The main sequence of data analysis is i) familiarisation of data, ii) coding and conceptualisation, iii) examination of the relationship, iv) formation of themes and v) reflection (Check & Schutt, 2012). Before the overall analysis process began, I conducted a pilot study to test if the overall research design would work. The pilot gave me a sense of what the material looked like and how the theoretical framework could be applied. After the completion of phase one, I exported the data from my university email to a Word document and organised it in

chronological order to ensure coherency and consistency. From the moment the data was collected until the completion of the writing, the data analysis had always been ongoing and continuous. The data analysis process was 'theory-saturated from the beginning' where '[t]he investigator tacks back and forth between primary data and the scholarship of others', (Riessman, 2008, p. 66). I used several key concepts drawn from my reading (see Chapter 3) to help me make sense, compare and contrast with the data in my research. There were roughly three steps that framed my data analysis process.

Step one was the preliminary data analysis involving the organisation, reading, and familiarisation of the data. In qualitative research, the data analysis can start before the entire data collection ceases, as the analysis is usually iterative and reflexive (Check & Schutt, 2012). The repeated reading of the data had already constituted an analysis process as the familiarisation process of the repeated reading of the chronologically organised data in the Word document laid the foundation of my perception of the data. I then coded the data in the Word document and used different headings to summarise their meaning. Afterwards, I put different headings together and identified a unique theme, which helped me reorganise the data. Every theme and heading would incorporate and correspond with a set of data from the WeChat group. I then went back to dig through the data again using the 'search' function of WeChat (see figure 5.1 for example) to check with, track, and triangulate the materials. In the coding process, I also wrote down my thoughts and ideas in the document to keep track of my reflections and examine how my mind perceived the data at the time. After the previous rounds of reviews, I produced the topic titles which could group the previous headings together. I then talked with my supervisors, went back to the data, and re-organised the topics which could best answer the research questions. They were also the ones which I would follow up in the interviews.

Step two took place after the completion of the interviews. I transcribed the interview data into a separate Word document and started to code it. The themes emerged from WeChat, and the interviews were interlinked, compared, and synthesised with each other. I reviewed the inter/intra relationships among the codes between the data from the WeChat group and the interviews. After the first round of coding, I came back to all the codes periodically to make sure the data had been thoroughly processed. I then made diagrams and charts to

connect and link different ideas. As an example, Table 5.1 shows how I used *ke wai ban* to demonstrate how different headings, characters, and stories were brought together under one theme in my analysis process.



(Figure 5.1 Searching information. Users can use the search function of WeChat to search for the WeChat group's history, by name, by date or by any keywords. In the picture on the right, when I typed the word education, the previous messages containing the keyword 'education', delivered by different parents in the group, were traced. The detail of the information includes one mother who was talking about Amazon and Kindle and how they could be used in acquiring educational books. Two mothers were discussing a book named 'Hacking Your Education'. The last person was me, commenting on the influence of these parents' socioeconomic backgrounds.)

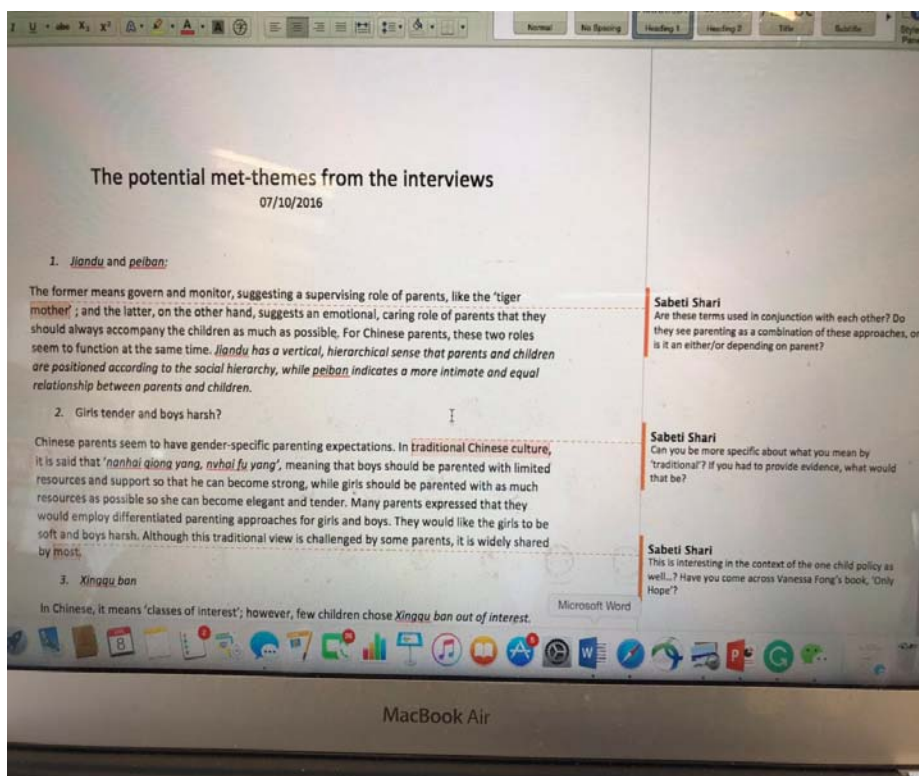
Names	Types of <i>ke wai ban</i> attended	Claims made about <i>ke wai ban</i>	Context	Linking points
Dudu	football, basketball and Taekwondo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Ke wai ban</i> helps children' self-exploration; b. Fulfil parents' responsibility; c. Parents' initiative; d. Age-based strategy; 	She asked advice from other parents about how to handle the <i>ke wai ban</i> children attended (from WeChat LA group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship with the state education system; Parents' responsibilities and pressure;

		<p>e. Asking the other parents about the meaning of <i>ke wai ban</i>;</p> <p>f. Worries it will become a financial burden.</p>	<p>conversation, 19 February 2016)</p> <p>I also asked her about <i>ke wai ban</i> participation in interviews (from the interview with Dudu, 19 July 2016).</p>	Confused about what to do with it?
Bi	Explicitly arguing against the attendance of <i>ke wai ban</i> for younger children	Taking away children's time to play	Expressing her determination to resist pressure from the outside (from the interview with Bi, 15 August 2016).	Time: freedom vs. structured activities
Dana	Three private tutors hired by her: piano, violin, and a fulltime tutor, teaching chess to painting and comprehensive skills.	Beneficial for children's growth	Middle-class parent's dedication to her child's education (from the interview with Dana, 13 August 2016).	High SES
Yaya	Dancing classes	Children's Competition; Parent's peer pressure	Expressing how registering children in only one class was deemed insufficient to ensure children's	Responsibility; Pressure on parents and children

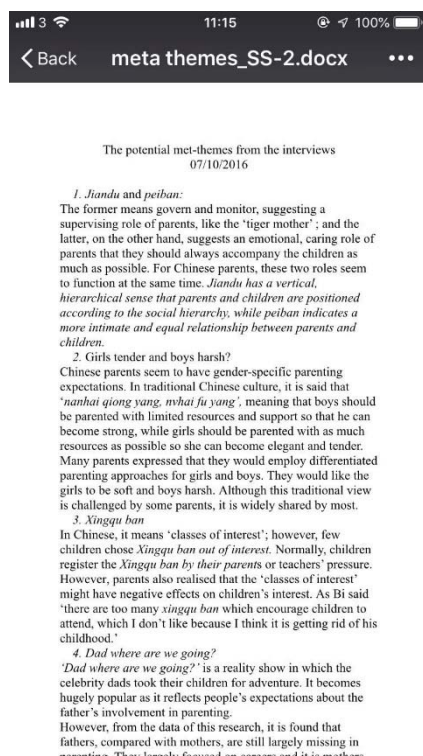
			success by other parents (from WeChat LA group conversation, 09 February 2016).	
Jennifer	Sports and painting, like swimming, tennis, ping-pong, painting; internet classes	Parents' guidance and direction in the choice of <i>ke wai ban</i> ; Respect for children's emotions, feelings and happiness	Discussion with other parents about the unwillingness to take children to too many <i>ke wai ban</i> (from WeChat LA group conversation, 29 December 2015).	Responsibility, Pressure and balance

(Table 5.1 An illustration of an analysis of the code of *ke wai ban*)

In step three, I reorganised the codes and materials in different ways in order to perceive the data from different angles. I compared different themes, found the most prominent ones, and went back to the data to re-evaluate them. In this round of data collection, I would make choices about not only which themes to include in the thesis but which I would leave out. Based on the three rounds of work, I worked out some meta-themes that formulated my conceptualisation, which was further commented on and discussed with my supervisors (see figure 5.2 for example). I exported the document to WeChat so I could further reflect and process it (see figure 5.3 for example). During the process, the WeChat search function allowed me to go back to the data in the WeChat group to contextualise the themes.



(Figure 5.2 The comments on the meta-themes by my supervisor)



(Figure 5.3 Mobile phone screenshot of the document in WeChat)

Research on social media brought a unique strength to my data collection and analysis process. As different social media platforms usually have different functions, setups, and rules, they usually provide different affordances for analysis of the data as well. With an intra-sited approach, the different functions of WeChat facilitated my data storage and helped me export information to emails and computers. WeChat also worked well for organising, searching, and indexing data as data could be accessed, organised, and traced in one platform. Furthermore, the data in WeChat was accrued and dynamic. Also, WeChat as a data archive was not static but continuous, providing a sustainable research setting unique to study contemporary life in China.

My writing involved materials from both the parents' group and the voice-call interviews. I decided to include both the vignettes from the WeChat group and the stories of certain characters generated from interviews. The different characters would be written about in different chapters. Depending on their relevance to the themes, I would bring to the foreground some characters in some chapters while making them part of the background in others. The portraits of the characters were based on both the interviews and their activities in the WeChat group. In general, during the writing process, data from phase one would lay the background ethnographic work, and data from phase two would add to the depth and specifics of the data. In different chapters, I also used different theories, as discussed in the literature review in Chapter 3, to interpret, explain, and process the vignettes, people's stories, conversations, and other data. During this process, I did not rely entirely on a single theory as the only lens to make sense of my data. For example, in Chapter 6, I used theories of Annette Lareau (2003) to make sense of parents' *ke wai ban* investment but also used my data to critique some of her theory within this context. Elsewhere, I also used the concepts of Kipnis (2011a) to understand the idea of *suzhi*.

5.3 Constraints of ethnography in social media

Despite all the benefits and potential brought by the use of social media for research, it also has its limitations. There might exist a gap between people's claims on social media and their actions in life (Baker, 2013; Hine, 2005). In my opinion, the inconsistency between online and offline life is an inevitable phenomenon in contemporary times where the Internet has penetrated every aspect of people's lives. People's online and offline lives are

complementary but will never be identical to each other. Due to these gaps, it is important for online researchers and readers to realise that what people claim online will not be naturally translated into their offline life, and that online and offline life will always be different from each other. This might be an important feature of online research that needs to be addressed rather than neglected. Having said that, the mainly textual information collected in social media was meaningful in its own right (DeDominicis, 2016). The online information alone constituted an important source of parents' construction of their parenting knowledge.

5.4 Ethics discussion

Online research has unsettled our thinking about ethics (Piacenti et al., 2014; S. M. Wilson & Peterson, 2002) as some classic ethics procedures and concepts may be hard to operationalise in the online socio-technical context (Tiidenberg, 2018). The ethics of online research is even more complicated than offline given the fluid, ambiguous, and dynamic nature of social media. So far, there has been no consensus on the online research guidelines (Tiidenberg, 2018) and researchers challenge how useful traditional ethics guidelines are in the online context (Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012). Instead, as an internationally-accepted protocol of the ethics of online research does not exist, it is up to the individual researcher to have the ethics discussion that is suitable to his/her own context (Schrooten, 2016) and be sensitive to the dynamic, always changing research process of the online context (Tiidenberg, 2018). The discussion of ethics in this section aims to explain the ethical challenges I encountered during the research process. It also attempts to problematise the general ethical discussion in online research with social media.

The ethical discussion in this research has been influenced by the re-conceptualisation of the public and private space in the virtual context, which I have discussed in section 4.7. There is an ongoing debate on the boundary between the public and private data in the online research context (Flick, 2016). Due to the complex online architecture and affordances, there has been an increasing potential for the public to engage with data. Researchers have to become cautious even in seemingly public space (N. K. Baym & Boyd, 2012). In my research, the boundary between public and private space was. I argued that the data I collected from the group was public data, based on the discussion of the re-

conceptualisation of public and private space and what I called 'individualised privacy' in section 4.7 as the participants could control their privacy settings. As Piacenti et al. (2014) argued, in the social media context, 'typical ethnographic ethics are largely incongruent as concerns over security, privacy, and identity are largely owned by each participant and is assumed to be a reflection of their own cost-benefit analysis of participation' (p. 234).

Researchers have noted that it is increasingly difficult for researchers to seek consents in a digital-mediated environment (Tiidenberg, 2018). Some advocate that consent may not be sought if the data is collected in the public domain (Henderson, Johnson, & Auld, 2013; Stevens, O'Donnell, & Williams, 2015). Meanwhile, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (2002) requires researchers to be cautious about informants' expectations even when interactions take place in an apparently public space. Other researchers have gone further arguing that it is meaningless for online research to distinguish between public and private data; the focus instead should be on avoiding harm rather than consent form per se (Markham & Buchanan, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2018). Some researchers also notice the 'come and go' nature of participants in the online environment and suggest that informed consent is not practical and should be waived on the basis that no harm and risk would be posed to participants, or that it could be controlled and managed (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004b). In terms of privacy protection, researchers should protect both the individual participants and the site where they conduct their study (Hine, 2008).

Based on these factors, I decided a traditional consent form was not feasible in my context. A practical reason was the 'come and go' nature of WeChat groups. Some information in the WeChat group was provided by individuals who had left the group: if someone made a contribution in the group and then chose to leave, it was almost impossible to get into contact with them, let alone ask them to sign the consent form. Also, asking each of the parent members for consent forms would abrupt the normal activity and daily routines, and affect the natural dynamic of the group (Schrooten, 2016). The WeChat parent group had open membership for any parent who was interested in discussing children's educational issues. When they posted anything in the group, they were aware that this information was visible to all other members. Thus, the contents of the WeChat group discussion could be perceived as public data which were generated in the public sphere (BPS, 2009).

Researchers studying social media are also advised to check the terms to understand the general expectations of the data generated in the platform (DeDominicis, 2016). According to the WeChat Terms of Service (2015), by registering as a WeChat user, people understand and agree that in WeChat groups, they should not include their personal and private information. Even though it has become an 'industry standard' to assign the responsibility of online risks to individuals rather than corporation players (Flick, 2016), I was aware that in practice, many social media users might dismiss the Terms of Service. Therefore, I also took active procedures to protect the participants' privacy, focusing on protecting their welfare throughout the entire process, which will be discussed later in this section.

Before the research, I had disclosed my position as a researcher at a UK university and openly expressed my interest in their activities in the group and my willingness to use the materials for my PhD study. I asked parents to state immediately whenever they felt uneasy and unwilling to be part of my study and I would exclude any information involving her/him in my research without any further contact. I also put this message as my personal status so that anyone checking my personal page on WeChat could understand what I had been doing in the group.

There were also other procedures in place to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the parents. First, users in WeChat have the right to choose their own aliases, genders, portrait pictures, and locations. In my group, the parents' virtual aliases worked as their de facto pseudonyms, which is an important part of information that ethnographers should protect (DeDominicis, 2016). Members of WeChat are also able to manage their privacy options by being the gatekeepers of their own information. In WeChat, without first being 'friends', people cannot talk to each other privately, view others' posts, or leave comments. WeChat users can personalise the levels of exposure of their personal information by configuring their privacy settings in WeChat. As I argued previously, the parents in my study were practicing a personalised and individualised privacy, which was to a large extent under the control of the informants themselves. Second, when people join a particular WeChat group, they can choose an alias which is different from their general alias in WeChat. For example, in my group, a mother named Lucy offline could have an online alias as Lily, and after joining the Little MBA group, she could further change her alias to Lorraine. Third,

apart from the protection of one's privacy offered through the features of WeChat itself, in this research I also anonymised their aliases again, and all potentially identifiable information was removed, so that their online identities were protected. When I translated and paraphrased the parents' conversations and activities, the shift of language from Chinese to English also added another layer of protection to their privacy, so that there was no way their dialogues in the group could be searched and traced by others.

Due to its public nature, practicality issues and the active measures I took to protect participants' privacy and welfare, the risks of the individual parent who participated in the research were minimal and a consent form from each member of the WeChat group was not considered feasible. This decision was made not in pursuit of simplicity, nor did it intentionally leave any ethical risks unexplored. Rather, the decision was based on the practicality of the research setting. Also, it ensured that there was no interruption of the natural flow of the group during the data collection. Most importantly, an arrangement had been made to ensure that the informants' privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality would be fully respected and protected with the following arrangements.

In the follow-up interviews in the second phase of the research, participants were contacted individually, electronic consent forms were distributed, and participants all gave oral consent to participating in the research. The consent forms are attached in the Appendix. In the consent form, I explained the purpose, main procedures, and expected implications of the research. For each of the interviews, after they expressed their interest and agreed to participate, I made an appointment with them and forwarded the consent form as a Word document. I asked them to read it carefully and before each interview began, I would ask them again whether they had read the consent form and would like to give me their agreement so that I could make sure all participants understood what I was doing and their rights in the research.

I also arranged the data so that it could be handled appropriately in order to minimise risk. I stored the exported data from the WeChat groups and the interview transcriptions in a safe online space provided by the university. All this information will be deleted five years after the research. However, regarding the data from the WeChat group, it should be noted that

as a feature of WeChat, all the information in the WeChat group is automatically stored in the mobile phones. This complicates the data storage issue as the information in the WeChat group would not only be stored in my own device, but also stored in the mobile phones of many other group members. Therefore, I am only able to ensure that the data that was processed by me will be deleted in due course. Regarding the recorded audio interviews in phase two, I will delete both the recordings and transcriptions five years after the research.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I gave the detailed descriptions of the methods employed in the current research. I also provided the rationales for the selection of the participants, data collection procedures and approaches of analysis. These specific steps were all based on the features of the WeChat and their potentials to answer the research questions. The ethical considerations were also given to make sure that the welfare, privacy and rights of the participants were fully addressed in this online research context.

Chapter 6

Ke wai ban: parents' educational strategies out of school

6.1 Introduction

I do not plan for his life. I only hope to provide good opportunities and conditions for him so that he can identify his interests and work hard on them. It is good enough if he can do something he really likes. (From the interview with Dudu, 19 July 2016)

The quotation above was from an interview with Dudu, an active parent in the Little MBA WeChat group. In the interview, Dudu told me that she took a relaxed approach to parenting and had an open mind about her child's education. It did not, however, prevent her, like many other parents in the WeChat group, from enrolling her child in various out-of-school educational programs including football, basketball, and Taekwondo. She did not see these educational programs as an imposition or burden for children; instead, she claimed that the purpose of these out-of-school educational programs was 'to provide the good opportunities and conditions for him so that he could identify his interests and work hard on them' so that her son 'could do something he really likes' later in life. Her views towards education were typical among the parents in the WeChat group, and I will analyse them in more detail later in the chapter. Dudu had not planned to participate in these education programs. Therefore, by enrolling a child in various education programs, was her approach to education natural and instinctive? Did she have no plans for her son, as she explicitly expressed in the group? What informed Dudu and other parents' choices, with regards to participation in education programs out of school? Was it really good enough for the child to do 'what he likes', as the mother indicated? What parental views and aspirations towards early years education could be revealed during the exploration process? In this chapter, I will investigate and explore these questions. In this process, the research questions can be interrogated.

In the thesis, I use the Chinese term *ke wai ban* to refer to the various forms of out-of-school classes attended by Chinese children. The Chinese term can help better address the

uniqueness, purposes, and contents of these education programs and can also shed light on its relationship with official educational institutions, which will be discussed later in the chapter. *Ke wai ban* practice is prevalent in Chinese cities and is an important part of Chinese education. In the global context, parents in the industrialised West also enrol their children in various types of enrichment classes (Lareau, 2003). However, the meanings, scopes, and implications for parents are entirely different. From the WeChat group, parents in China credited *ke wai ban* highly for children's educational achievement.

Part of my data collection happened to fall within the winter holiday, which was a time when children and teachers in (pre)schools were supposed to have a break. However, one theme that frequently dominated parents' discussions during the holiday time was their concerns as to how to make sure their children could spend a 'meaningful' winter break. Parents were keen to make sure that children were not 'wasting' time and were learning something during the break while they were supposed to be relaxing.

In the following section, I will start by defining and categorising *ke wai ban* and then move to discuss the factors influencing parents' *ke wai ban* decisions, before looking at its relationship with official educational institutions. I will then focus on the stories of two mothers from the WeChat group, Fena and Luli, to detail the mechanism of parents' decision making around *ke wai ban*. Fena and Luli came from different backgrounds and had different social and economic resources at their disposal that could be invested in their children's *ke wai ban*. Although both of them were involved in *ke wai ban* activities, they demonstrated quite different mentalities, behaviour, and strategies during the process. In this chapter, I put Chinese parents' *ke wai ban* practice in the global context to understand the complexities of the issue, by making comparisons and contrasts of *ke wai ban* practice with the notion of *concerted cultivation*, raised by Annette Lareau in her book *Unequal Childhoods: class, race and family life* (2003). I will try to explore the similarities and differences of *ke wai ban* with American families' *concerted cultivation*, which is a predominantly middle-class behaviour.

Through doing this, I aim to understand the specificities of the Chinese parents' understanding of their roles in early years education and add a new dimension to Lareau's

framework. I will discuss the cultural logic of the cultivation of *suzhi*, which means human quality, and explain how it plays a vital role in bringing up children in China. I will also interrogate how *suzhi* led to the cross-class practice of *ke wai ban*. Through interrogation of *ke wai ban* in this chapter, I try to address the research questions of the thesis:

1. What are parents' views about current EYE practice in China?
2. What do parents' views reveal about their aspirations for their children's education?
3. What are their understandings of the role of parenting in their children's EYE?

6.2 What is *ke wai ban*?

Ke wai ban is used here as an umbrella term for various fee-paying educational services in which parents enrol their children, which are held outside the official classes of (pre)schools. As mentioned above, for many urban Chinese parents, various types of *ke wai ban* have become an indispensable part of the Chinese education landscape. The literal translation of *ke wai ban* can be loosely translated as 'extracurricular classes' or 'out-of-school classes' in English, but neither of the translations can faithfully reveal its significance and the multiple layers of meaning Chinese parents attach to it. In the Chinese context in the WeChat group, *ke wai ban* has a broader denotation. It can either mean the enrichment classes that teach children various arts, sports, and other talents that are not compulsory in the official curriculum; or it can encompass the curriculum-based academic enhancement classes. I also argue that *ke wai ban* has a close relationship, more than its name indicates, with official educational institutions like preschools and schools. Though its name suggests it takes place out of classes, it is where Chinese parents in the WeChat group can most actively get involved in their children's EYE. Understanding parents' involvement with their children's *ke wai ban* education helps review and reflect upon their interaction with their children's entire EYE process.

Before moving to an in-depth discussion on how and why parents engaged with *ke wai ban* in the WeChat group, I will first present the various *ke wai ban* provisions some parents in the group mentioned in the WeChat group, to construct a rough category of *ke wai ban*.

Types of <i>ke wai ban</i>	Typical subjects mentioned by parents
Academic enhancement classes	English (Joy), maths, Chinese language, Maths Olympics, cognitive abilities, technology and robotics (Dudu)
Enrichment classes (arts)	Piano (Amy, Dana), painting (Jennifer, Good Mood), violin (Dana), dancing (Yaya), choir (Cici)
Enrichment classes (sports)	Swimming (Jane, Jennifer), tennis (Jane, Jennifer), ping pong (Jane, Jennifer), football (Cici, Dudu), basketball (Cici, Dudu), Taekwondo (Dudu)
Others	<i>Weike</i> or internet classes (Jennifer, Luli), manners (Dana)

(Table 6.1 Types of *ke wai ban*)

These *ke wai ban* services served different purposes and needs of different parents and children in the WeChat group. They ranged from academic programs to arts and sports. The ways the programs were delivered were also very different, thanks to improved technology. However, what was a common thread was that by enrolling children in these out-of-school activities, parents hoped to cultivate their children's development and growth, which could help their children to gain an edge in education and competitions in adult life.

Against the backdrop of the highly competitive Chinese education system, it seemed to be a common practice for the parents in the WeChat group to send their children to *ke wai ban* in order to stand out. This, however, was not easy. Different forms of *ke wai ban* abounded in the increasingly commercialised education market and they catered to parents' different pursuits. In the following sections, I will detail the different experiences of parents involved in different *ke wai ban* practices to understand how parents made decisions about the inclusion of *ke wai ban*.

6.3 The relationship between *ke wai ban* and schooling

Different types of *ke wai ban* had different purposes. Some were designed to earn credentials for children's performances in schools. They were accepted by schools as evidence of a child's competence and could help children and the family accumulate

educational resources in China's education system. They were even treated as part of the (pre)school's unofficial accreditation system. The following excerpt was taken from a conversation in the WeChat group taking place among four parents, Cat, Nuonuo, Melon, and Wind. Their discussion about selecting different *ke wai ban* was illuminative of their view of and aspirations for their children's EYE.

Cat:

@nuonuo, we are now in the stage of *xiao sheng chu* [primary to junior secondary school selection tests]. We are also confronted with concerns, as everyone is. Previously we ensured that our child had abundant time to play, to observe nature, or to have the chance to be a little architect. We did things that weren't relevant to academic learning in schools. Currently, my friends are talking about this Learning for Excellence [LfE, a famous educational company specialised in enhancing pupils' academic performance], as we are not very informed on institutions like this, feeling confused now...

Nuonuo:

It takes three hours learning during the weekends... I feel that there isn't enough time to play.

Melon:

Actually don't rely on others, if you're interested [in LfE] just visit and see.

Wind:

When a child doesn't have many choices at a young age and is enrolled in so many classes, it means that his time is fully arranged by his parents, and he can't develop the ability to arrange his own time.

Nuonuo:

@Melon, what are the contents? Maths Olympics?

Melon:

Yes. It's Maths Olympics.

Nuonuo:

Do you use it for *xiao sheng chu*? Or for any other reason?

Wind:

And children seem to like attending those training classes only because when they're there, they're able to escape from their parents. They'll think that it's their own world.

...

Wind:

These children may have advantages at *xiao sheng chu*, at *zhongkao* (senior secondary school entrance examination) or even *gaokao* (college entrance examination). However, have you ever thought about when he's in university? He would have no potential.

(The conversation above took place on 29th February 2016)

Indeed, when parents took their children to *ke wai ban* for academic enhancement training, their decision making was not exclusively based on academics. It was a process where different education and parenting agendas – for instance, being successful in the school selection process while developing all-around abilities – were negotiated and (re)prioritised. In their conversation above, Cat was seeking advice and information from other parents in the group about academic enhancement services for her child at LfE, a famous Chinese education company. With the EYE drawing to a close and more selective tests approaching, Cat was facing a transition where she had to turn to *ke wai ban* to enhance her child's academic performance in the competitive selection process. They mentioned Maths Olympics, a subject that, despite not being part of the school curriculum, was highly valued in the school selection process in China. However, the choice was not without any challenges. Wind doubted the usefulness of Maths Olympics, questioning if it still helped when children go to university. There were also concerns about the erosion of children's free play time and that they might fail to develop time management skills.

Regarding the non-academic *ke wai ban* options, it seemed that they had quite a distinctive liberal education purpose and focused mainly on fostering children's all-round abilities. However, among these non-academic *ke wai ban*, some had a closer relationship with children's school performance and were more well-recognised by educational institutions

than others. The following conversation took place a few weeks after the completion of Cat's child's school selection. It took place in the WeChat group and illuminated the ways in which some of the parents made choices for their children's *ke wai ban* practice.

Cat:

We just finished *xiao sheng*. As we did not go to academic training classes, when confronted with the questions on Maths Olympics and questions which were beyond the scope of the school curriculum, we finally understood why *ke wai ban* was so popular. However, I've been thinking about what the long term benefits of it are.

...

Happiness:

If we have to be realistic, what kind of art-based *ke wai ban* do you want your child to learn?

Cat:

@Happiness, yes, I was also too naïve. To be frank, doing those things was good for school selection.

...

Nuonuo:

Concerning arts worth learning, you should pick up an uncommon one. My friend's child was learning the piano, but now the flute. It's said that in an orchestra, there will be only one piano performer, but you can have many people playing the flute, which significantly enhances your child's chances of being admitted to the school's orchestra. Once in, you'll get many advantages.

Happiness:

I know a colleague whose child achieved Level 10 in piano before finishing primary school. That means that if the child's academic performance is not the best, then the mother has laid a solid foundation for the child's development in the arts path.

Emma:

The piano is no longer enough now. You can find children playing it everywhere. I'm thinking that if it is really about school selection and you want to go to a key primary school, instead of pushing children so hard for academic drills, they should choose to learn an art.

(The conversation above took place on 15th March 2016)

Parents like Nuonuo or Emma, who suggested other parents pick up an 'uncommon' musical instrument so that they could participate in the school orchestra, were doing so with an obvious mission in mind. Parents' beliefs in the potential benefits brought by participation in a school orchestra also indicated how some non-curricula art learning was positioned in a favoured place by parents in their EYE strategy. Although not officially incorporated by

curriculum and (pre)schools, parents who failed to meet the demands and pressure to give their children access to these educational opportunities risked being regretful at a later stage of schooling – as Cat experienced in the above conversation.

Parents' decision making on *ke wai ban* was complex. The choice parents made was usually based on a set of intertwined factors including parents' educational strategies, their pragmatic judgement for the success of their children, and the concern for their children's interests and health. The conversations above focused on how parents could best help their children in EYE to succeed in the selective education process. It was such a long-term project that parents had to plan and prepare early (see also Chapter 9). In order to make sure their children could enrol in the desired schools and have the best possible educational resources and opportunities, parents in this group had to spare no efforts to help their children, from a very young age, to develop the right skills, knowledge, and learning dispositions that were valued in the selective education system. In China, even though students are normally entitled to transfer from their primary schools to the designated secondary schools in their catchment area, many parents strive to send their children to a different school out of their catchment area, or to an elite private or international school. Usually, these schools will set up their own evaluation systems and select students by merit. In order to become competitive candidates, parents in the WeChat group had to enrol their children in various *ke wai ban* to cultivate their children's various abilities. The purpose of this type of cultivation was pragmatic with a clear purpose projected towards children's ownership of future education resources.

There were also parents who chose *ke wai ban* for their children with less pragmatic concerns, focusing more on the children themselves. However, their choice to give their children time to have fun and develop all-round abilities sometimes collided with the agenda of the official education institutions. Going back to the opening claim made by Dudu, she wanted to give her son exposure to different things to 'identify his interests'. However, children's natural interests did not always sit well with the school's agenda. The interview with her disclosed parenting agenda that was different from the other parents in the WeChat group.

Right now, the academic workload is okay. Also, I've given him the opportunity to try different enrichment classes to see what his interest is. But sports and exercise are something I ask him to carry on doing, so football, basketball, and Taekwondo are all that he is learning right now. But I know after the third grade in primary school that the academic burden will become heavier and we have to give up some interests, as time is really limited.

(From the interview with Dudu, 19 July 2016)

For Dudu, even though the *ke wai ban* in sports were highly valued by her, they had to give away to academic learning at some particular point in time. These *ke wai ban* options were necessary for children's all-round development only when 'the academic workload is OK'. In other words, academic learning in school for her weighed more, in the long run, than these sports enrichment classes.

The *ke wai ban* options mentioned in the WeChat group ranged from academic enhancement programs to arts and sports training. They catered for parents and families with different pursuits, goals, levels of flexibility, and purchasing power. By participating in the various *ke wai ban*, parents were exercising their agency and were actively involved in their children's education and development. From the conversations above, it can be seen that parents' interactions with these *ke wai ban* programs were also influenced by the official education system. The academic progress and pressure in schools sometimes spilled over to the education programs in out-of-school *ke wai ban* programs. Parents sometimes projected children's early years education to the secondary school stage where academic study would dominate; at other times, some parents cared more about giving children the space to jump, play, and have fun. These different parents' agendas were met by different kinds of *ke wai ban*. In the meantime, however, parents' choices were not static. They had constantly been evaluating and assessing the relationship between official early years education, *ke wai ban* programs, and their children, based on their own experience, knowledge, judgement, and aspirations for their children's education.

6.4 *Ke wai ban* and parents with different socioeconomic resources

In this section, I will focus on the stories of two mothers from the WeChat group, Fena and Luli, to investigate how parents' different conditions could influence their *ke wai ban* practice and how parents responded to the differences. Fena and Luli came from different

backgrounds and had different socioeconomic resources at their disposal that could be invested in their children's *ke wai ban*. In their stories, I will try to demonstrate their different mentalities, behaviour, and strategies when confronted with *ke wai ban*.

6.4.1 Fena's story of *ke wai ban*

A mother of an eight-year-old boy, Fena was employed at a well renowned university in Beijing, the capital of China. At the time that I interviewed her via WeChat audio call, Fena was taking part in an academic exchange program at a British university. She disclosed that she was involved in organising and teaching Chinese at a Confucius Institute in England, a program funded by the Chinese government to promote its language and culture in different countries in an attempt to increase what it deems its 'soft power'. Every year, the government recruits teachers from its public-funded universities and sends them abroad. Fena was one of them. She told me that during her stay in the UK, she took her son with her and registered him at a local school that had links with the church. As a typical middle-class, well-educated mother, Fena was actively involved in her son's education and was able to articulate her ideas. During the interview, she described herself as being composed and 'kind of worry-free', although she did express concern about her son's free play time being encroached by the increasing academic agenda. The *ke wai ban* Fena signed her son up in China for was not uncommon for other affluent parents in the WeChat group and it seemed to fall under a similar umbrella of out-of-school activities that affluent children attend in the US (Laureau, 2003, p.1-2).

When asked what type of *ke wai ban* her son attended, Fena told me,

He did attend many *ke wai ban*, which mainly focused on sports and painting. It began with swimming, tennis, then ping-pong, later painting. To be honest, I actually feel sorry that I did not enable him to learn piano.

(From the interview with Fena on 28 August 2016)

The *ke wai ban* her son took could be broadly categorised into sports and arts. These subjects mainly focused on children's development out of the official, academic curriculum niche. Fena told me she did not feel as much academic pressure as many other parents around her did. She claimed in the interview, 'I did not put too much pressure on him at all.' She further categorised herself as 'the last person to worry about the children'. However, it was doubtful whether she was really such a carefree parent as she described. Despite the

various *ke wai ban* her child was participating in, Fena felt 'regretful' that her son could not learn piano, a feeling that seemed to strike her quite emotionally. When I asked her why she felt 'regretful', she adopted a guilty tone. She sighed and then stopped for a short while before telling me,

[A]t the beginning, he actually liked it. He liked to learn about piano and other such things. But for me, I think he was too young to learn everything. And if he learnt piano, he still had the other classes to attend, so his whole weekend would be taken up. And especially for my family, it was our routine to take a day off each week to play and enjoy, which he really likes. Another reason he did not learn (piano) was that his father and I felt that we had to really have perseverance and courage to pick up such a hobby. (But) now I feel that he is really sensitive to music.

(From the interview with Fena on 28 August 2016)

For Fena, having not enabled her son to learn piano made her feel guilty. She told me in the interview that when they were at an exhibition in London, she found her son was so fond of the piano that he kept using his fingers to touch one he found in a show, displaying tremendous interest in it. She then felt bad because she had not supported her son's interest in piano properly. However, Fena did have solid cause for not signing her son up for piano. Firstly, he already had an overwhelming schedule that was dominated by various *ke wai ban*. She was worried that the young boy would not have time for leisure and relaxation: a full day's schedule meant the interruption of their family's established routine for outings, which she once proudly claimed as a 'distinctive family component' in the group. Besides, Fena also highlighted that learning piano needed 'perseverance' and 'courage' from not only the child but also the parents. Rather than focus on children, who were the subjects and direct recipients of *ke wai ban*, what she said explicitly associated *ke wai ban* with parents' endeavours in education and emphasised their active role as primary stakeholders who bear the responsibilities for their children's education. This echoed parents' active intervention in choosing *ke wai ban* in the WeChat group in section 6.3.

For Fena, the economic constraint was not mentioned at the time as a particular problem regarding her decision making around *ke wai ban*. What mattered more was the parental input of time and energy, which were cited as one of her concerns that stopped her son from pursuing the piano. A further comment about her son's swimming lessons by Fena

possibly demonstrated her own theories about *ke wai ban*, where parental responsibilities, discipline, and free choice by children were all addressed.

Well, for swimming, I was the one who signed him up on his behalf. I felt like, well, he should be able to swim. But he was not particularly happy at the very beginning. However, I had a theory that the reason he did not like it was that he had not yet managed to taste the joy of it as he had not yet mastered the skills. For swimming, when he could not hold his breath or could not swim well, he was unhappy. But once he made a breakthrough, with the help of the teacher, he began to enjoy it so much. Like in the beginning when he came to the UK, before he could fully adapt to life and be able to find joy here, he was unhappy. But once he managed to get through that period, and once he found happiness in it, he changed his opinions very quickly. So parents sometimes have to make a decision for their children, really.

(From the interview with Fena on 28 August 2016)

Fena, like many other Chinese parents in the WeChat group, believed in a parent's responsibility to make decisions regarding *ke wai ban*, as well as other important things in their children's lives. If necessary, parents were ready to force their children into doing something they did not initially like. It seemed that Fena was trying to exercise absolute power in her children's hobby picking and *ke wai ban* choice. For her, it was a way to exercise the apparent parental responsibility to guide children towards identifying joy and interest in the learning process, so that they could eventually accept and love a hobby that their parents believed was important.

In the meantime, parents like Fena listened to their children and would feel guilty if they could not adequately support and develop their emerging interests. In fact, Fena and many other parents in this WeChat group already showed tendencies of being democratic Chinese parents, as they were eager to employ a relaxed way of parenting, and they would listen to their children. Still, Fena believed it was necessary to assert a firm, active, and authoritative role in the selection of different *ke wai ban*. Perhaps for Fena, leaving the choice entirely to her children did not lie in their best interests. Her children's interests were important to Fena, which was obvious in her deep regret over the missed opportunity of learning piano. But even as a relatively easy-going mother, as she commented about herself, she was ready to exercise her own judgement, and if necessary, felt she was legitimised to force her child to learn something until the child could 'taste the joy' and become self-motivated.

6.4.2 Luli's story of *ke wai ban*

Participation in *ke wai ban* seemed to be a widespread practice in the WeChat group. However, the options that were taken for granted by parents like Fena might be out of reach for others. Despite the similar pursuit and interest in their children's creativity, entrepreneurship, and innovation, parents in this WeChat group were not uniform regarding their socioeconomic resources, geographical location, or purchasing power. These differences would influence parents' *ke wai ban* choices.

Luli was a mother located in a small town in Shandong Province. She was an active member who liked to share her experience and opinions in the WeChat group. In the meantime, she had very different background compared with Fena in the previous section. In the WeChat group, I got to know that after earning an Associate's Bachelor degree, she chose a part-time job so that she could take care of her daughter, who was eight years old and studying in a local primary school. In the interview, Luli repeatedly mentioned the tremendous academic pressure her daughter felt in school. As a parent in Shandong Province, the birthplace of Confucius, Luli seemed to be born with high expectations for their children's academic learning, as she saw Shandong as an 'exam-oriented' province herself.

During the past years, the form of education has changed little in Shandong. It is still dominated by exams which are the sole standard of evaluation.

(From the interview with Luli on 6 August 2016)

Unlike Fena, Luli did not mention any of the arts- and sports-focused *ke wai ban* that her daughter attended. It seemed that interest and time invested in this type of *ke wai ban* had to give way to academic study. In the interview, she criticised the education system that 'speak(s) with marks'. Moreover, Luli said that the local parents had to be partially responsible for what she considered a 'backward and rigid educational approach'. She blamed parents as having a 'peasant-like mind-set and selfish personality'.

In the interview, I asked her to specify the *ke wai ban* options she chose for her daughter. She did not choose such a wide variety as Fena did for her daughter.

What's currently popular in the town is a program called Brainpower (*zui qiang da nao*), but I'm not sure if children should learn about that; I don't know if there are

more advantages or disadvantages. [In terms of choosing *ke wai ban*] I don't know where to start, which makes me feel confused. Too much information.

(From the interview with Luli on 6 August 2016)

Brainpower was a popular reality show in China that sought 'talented people' to compete in answering fact-based questions of various levels of difficulty. It was the Chinese version of the popular German reality show *Superhirn*. After becoming increasingly popular in China, the entertaining program became a new sort of *ke wai ban* in Luli's hometown. It had successfully made its brand known throughout the mass media, transforming from a popular reality show into an educational activity. In Shandong, where the exam competition was particularly fierce due to its Confucian tradition and large population, this program was quickly accepted and became very popular. Furthermore, the ambiguous name of *Brainpower* vaguely suggested a link between memorising factual knowledge (a key evaluation of educational outcomes that helped children stand out in Shandong's fierce education competition) and being influential in education and life, which was in line with the current education reality in Shandong Province.

Nevertheless, confronted with a unique choice of *ke wai ban*, Luli felt confused. Even though she seemed to be assertive and active in discussing parenting issues with other parents in the WeChat group, in the interview she told me that she felt discouraged and confused in general about choosing the right *ke wai ban* for her daughter. Compared with Fena, Luli did not have the comparable knowledge, outlook, or judgement to make an informed and confident choice. In the interview, she told me that one of the benefits of joining the parents' group was that it brought her onto the same platform as Fena and many other parents who had substantial information from whom Luli wished to learn. In the parents' collective pursuit of fulfilling their responsibility for parenting and education in this WeChat group, they could also learn from each other.

In WeChat, people's choice of *ke wai ban* was no longer restricted to offline, face-to-face communication. Designed as a form of online learning mediated by WeChat, *weike* was a product of cooperation between social media and educators where educational content was delivered through the different functions of WeChat. The educational content of *weike* was innovative and flexible compared with traditional, offline classes. *Weike* had become

increasingly popular among the parents in the WeChat group; some *weike* were free to attend at the beginning and became fee-payable when they had accumulated enough of an audience and established a reputation. In the interview, I also asked Luli's involvement in *weike* in the group. She told me that she occasionally signed up her daughter for *weike* in WeChat. She once joined a *weike* about currencies and both she and her daughter seemed to like it,

I used to send my daughter to the *weike* about currencies. The scenario was that if you were the leader of a country, how were you going to design your own currency? She attended some free classes like this.

(From the interview with Luli on 6 August 2016)

Currencies in this *weike* were designed creatively as a project for children to explore the function of currencies in the economy. The project-based learning might not be unfamiliar in the Western education context. However, for many children and parents in China, it could be something untraditional and innovative. Children in this kind of *weike* were given enough freedom, autonomy, and trust, facilitated and monitored by parents, to explore a topic in question. Luli was aware of the benefits *weike* brought to her daughter's education; meanwhile, she kept herself a distance from wholeheartedly embracing this trend. She commented *weike* in the interview,

The advantage of the new kind of class was that there were varieties of different choices. However, in the meanwhile, the disadvantage was there were too many choices.

(From the interview with Luli on 6 August 2016)

Her worries about 'too many choices' of *weike* were consistent with her confusion about choosing offline *ke wai ban*. The explosion of different choices in the educational market and information that was made available by the WeChat group brought both satisfaction and confusion for Luli. She felt a bit lost in choosing the right educational content in both the online *weike* and the offline *ke wai ban* that could best meet the interests of her daughter. These *weike* and *ke wai ban* were not part of the school requirement but were favoured by them through the various school selection processes. It was a non-public education service that would significantly advantage children and the entire families' position in the public system. However, parents and individual families were responsible for the selection, payment, and organisation of the logistics. Neither the state nor the public

schools claimed responsibilities. Economic constraints also proved to be a barrier for Luli to continue exploring the different choices.

In a small place like Shandong, where the purchasing power is quite weak, four projects there [in online *weike*] cost almost four thousand RMB [about £470], which is way too much. Nevertheless, the children seem to like the assignment of the *weike*. I believe that economic factors can pretty much determine parents' choices for the lessons.

(From the interview with Luli on 6 August 2016)

She had never talked about her economic situation in the WeChat group, nor did she mention it in the interview until the very end, probably when enough trust had been built up. Maybe for her, the economic constraints regarding education were shameful, especially in such a WeChat group where parents were talking about sending their children to study abroad from time to time. In the interview, in describing her hometown as 'a small place...where the purchasing power is quite weak' she expressed a sense of embarrassment.

Even though Fena and Luli inhabited the same online space and shared similar interests concerning *ke wai ban*, they still had very different attitudes and practices towards parenting and education. Fena seemed more informed and confident when choosing *ke wai ban*. As a Master's graduate who was working in a higher education institution, she seemed to know more about the contents of the different *ke wai ban* and how they could be used to enhance children's future progress. When residing in either Beijing or England, Fena could easily find various options in her locality that could best suit her needs. This was not always possible in a small city like Luli's hometown in Shandong.

Additionally, Fena had a broader outlook and vision. During her interview, she frequently referred to her exposure to Western education. Her experience and background made her a comparable figure to her middle-class counterparts in the Western world. As an affluent parent in Beijing with a UK exchange experience, she never expressed, in neither the WeChat group nor the interview, any financial concerns that restricted her choices of *ke wai ban*, as Luli did. Indeed, Luli's was in a very different situation. She had limited social and cultural resources to draw on and little guidance to inform her as to what courses best suited her daughter's needs. Also, these needs had to be compromised when faced with the limited educational services provided in the education market in a small town in Shandong.

To overcome these disadvantages, Luli extended her vision to the online world in WeChat. The *weike* in WeChat proved to align with her daughter's interest in the project-centred approach and unconventional delivery of knowledge and skills. To some extent, it seemed to bridge the gap between Luli's small-town world and a bigger outside world that she could not reach. However, this bridge was tenuous and fragile as Luli was well aware that these courses all had a commercial purpose in the long run and would ultimately need payment and become part of the capitalised educational market in China. Therefore, when *weike* were no longer free, despite her daughter's tremendous interest, they had to quit as it surpassed their budget. Although *weike* and its platform WeChat had the potential to equalise the flow of educational information and empower disadvantaged people, with the invasion of the marketisation of education and charging high fees for *weike* participants, it also risked widening the gap of people's access to education resources.

Despite the different backgrounds of the two parents, Fena and Luli's stories had at least three aspects in common. Firstly, both Fena and Luli, regardless of their different social and cultural statuses, valued their children's education and were concerned about the benefits and drawbacks brought by *ke wai ban* to their education performance. Secondly, they both assumed an active role in pursuing *ke wai ban* and by doing so, addressed the responsibilities of supporting their children's educational success, expressing a sense of guilt derived from their feelings that they could have provided better education opportunities, and frustrations when they failed to meet some of their children's educational expectations. Thirdly, social media had the capacity to bridge the socioeconomic gap in terms of parents' practices of *ke wai ban* and its associated benefits, even though it could also widen the gap. So why is *ke wai ban* so popular that it can cross classes and geographic boundaries?

6.5 *ke wai ban* and concerted cultivation

It is necessary to situate *ke wai ban* in the global context to fully understand it. Parents' practice of *ke wai ban* in the WeChat group echoed American middle-class parents' concerted cultivation (CC), an education and parenting approach described by American sociologist Annette Lareau (2003, 2011). As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 3, the CC approach is a cultural logic of bringing up children. Parents who adopt this approach

tend to enrol their children in various structured activities and have a more democratic way of interacting with children. Middle-class parents typically adopt a CC approach to boost their children's sense of entitlement and the ability to reason and negotiate in institutional settings, which are important qualities in a democratic society like the US. This child raising practice cultivates children's talents and capabilities and, by scheduling and standardising children's leisure time, parents familiarise children with their adult life which emphasises rationality, efficiency, predictability, control, and regulation (Lareau, 2003, pp. 246-247).

This is contrary to an accomplishment of natural growth (AoNG) approach where parents tend to leave their children unsupervised during their out-of-school time. Children with parents employing such an approach are less involved in structured activities out of school and are usually subject to their parents' directives rather than reasons. It exerts a sense of restraint for children especially when children are dealing with authority and are 'out of synch with the standards of institutions' (Lareau, 2003, p. 3). In the American context, CC and AoNG may represent middle class and working class education strategies respectively. Parents, by using the two distinctive approaches, also tend to reproduce their social class positions (Lareau, 2003, 2011; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016).

Even though the types of *ke wai ban* pursued by Fena and Luli were entirely different, what they had in common was that they both engaged in certain organised activities that could cultivate children in their leisure time. These organised activities arranged by parents echoed the practice of concerted cultivation conducted by some middle-class American families (Lareau, 2003, pp. 1-5). Fena had made a busy schedule to fill up her son's free time with various arts and sports, despite her concerns about the invasion and erosion of family time. Luli was aware that a *ke wai ban* turned from a reality show had become a hit in her town, even though she was still doubtful as to whether it would genuinely bring children any benefit. Also, by joining *weike* in WeChat, Luli tried to catch up with her counterpart parents in more prosperous and developed cities and followed what she considered more advanced practice. She struggled to pay for the expenses of *weike*, but was equally eager to instil a somewhat entrepreneurial and creative pedagogic approach as parents did in bigger cities.

At a national level, there were considerable similarities between parents' practice of CC and AoNG in both China and the US. Parents who possessed more resources could invest more time, money, and attention in the development of their children's various interests and academic preparation or enhancement activities, compared with parents with fewer resources. Well-off families had more flexibility and freedom in choosing the education products they wanted their children to have. Furthermore, these out-of-school learning opportunities in both China and the US had spilled into school-based education, and interacted with the official education agenda, influencing how children and parents were perceived by teachers and how they were positioned in the evaluation system in schools. Also, in both contexts, family life and parents' educational choices were products of a dynamic and complex combination of structured and unstructured activities for both academic and non-academic purposes. Families across classes and cultures experienced joy, laughter, frustration, and pride in raising their children. In both China and the US, parenting practices and parents' aspirations for their children's growth transmitted a set of cultural repertoires and gave children advantages they could draw on in their respective life circumstances, reflecting their own cultural logic of education and parenting (Lareau, 2003, pp. 6-7).

While these Chinese parents' practices in the WeChat group shared some similarities with the concerted cultivation approach adopted by American middle-class families, they differed in important ways. Interrogation of the differences can contribute to an understanding of the Chinese parents' views and attitudes towards *ke wai ban* and EYE in general. By exposing parents' contexts and concerns, I also aim to explicate the uniqueness of this group of parents and add a new perspective to Lareau's theories (2003, 2011) as part of the contribution of this study.

Unlike in the US, where it was mainly middle-class parents who adopted the approach of CC, in China this approach seemed to be taken by families from more diverse backgrounds, including some of the parents with relatively limited socioeconomic resources, like Luli. According to the cultural logic of American families who adopted the CC approach, CC could teach children the reason and rationality needed in dealing with institutions in adult life (Lareau, 2003), whereas Chinese parents' seemingly widespread adoption of the approach

might be rooted in a *suzhi* discourse evident in Chinese education and child rearing (see section 3.5 for more detail of *suzhi*). *Suzhi* is a highly contentious notion in China which can roughly be translated as the human quality, although quality cannot cover its nuances (Woronov, 2009; J. Wu, 2012).

Andrew Kipnis (2011a) used ethnography to investigate what he termed 'educational desire' in Zouping, a small county in China. He found that the Chinese parents in Zouping were driven to improve their children's *suzhi* and academic performance. *Suzhi* was not only regarded as a way to guarantee a child's future success but was held as an important part of his or her growth in its own end. *Suzhi* was also a word that was frequently used by parents in the Little MBA WeChat group. During the data collection in phase one, it appeared 25 times in parents' discussions about their children's EYE. Chinese parents' desire to improve their children's *suzhi* was made obvious by their participation of *ke wai ban*, and parents held themselves responsible for providing these opportunities to 'generat(e) their children's biographies through the development of the children's intellectual, social, cultural, physical and emotional skills' (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016, p. 273).

For Fena, learning the various arts and sports, potentially valued by the official education system, satisfied her aspirations to give her child good opportunities that could fully uncover his potential. At the beginning of the chapter, Dudu enrolled her child in various *ke wai ban* so that her child could 'identify his interest and work hard on it,' which was also part of the scheme to improve her child's *suzhi*. Luli registered her child for the online *weike*, so that she could catch up academically with children in big cities. By doing this, Luli tried to overcome the disadvantages caused by her relative lack of socioeconomic resources and peripheral location in a small town. These practices all helped the parents to fulfil their responsibility to raise their children's *suzhi*.

Another significant difference lay in the parents' self-awareness of their own parenting practices. While in the US, both middle class and working class parents applied their respective parenting strategies naturally and automatically (Lareau, 2003), parents in this WeChat group seemed to bear more awareness of educational practice. They had actively exercised their agency and taken the initiative to cultivate their children concertedly. They could also articulate their parenting approach and its associated benefits and drawbacks.

Luli actively pursued online *weike* so that her daughter would not fall behind her counterparts in big cities. Fena was regretful that she was not able to provide her son with the opportunity to learn piano. Both of them were clear in the benefits of *ke wai ban* and intentionally promoted it, and both felt bad if they failed to provide such opportunities. The Chinese parents in my research were similar to parents in Vincent and Maxwell (2016)'s study who were faced with different parenting priorities and pressures. The middle-class British parents had to proactively pursue educational excellence, including out of class educational opportunities, in order to inculcate the cultural capital that would contribute to the reproduction of social class. If parents failed to meet the demands of concerted cultivation, they risked being branded as practicing parenting inadequately or even as parents who lacked the will and aspirations for their children's educational success.

While in the US, the parenting approach of concerted cultivation benefits the official education in schools, the Chinese parents' concerted cultivation of *ke wai ban* practice was more closely built into the official education system's agenda. As a parent in the WeChat group said, 'Schools are the main course and *ke wai ban* is the side food; both are indispensable' (from Ouyan in the WeChat group, 13 December 2015). Like the concerted cultivation in the US (Lareau, 2003), *ke wai ban* was also the mechanism to (re)distribute and (re)produce educational resources, collectively recognised by parents, the state, (pre)schools, and commercial *ke wai ban* providers. What was different was that Chinese *ke wai ban* had always been future-oriented and projected to the next academic stage in the education system. In early years education in China, parents had to prepare for the various selective process for key education resources, as evidenced in section 5.2. This pursuit of high-quality educational resources for the next stage often overrode other agendas and dominated parents' decision making on whether or not to go to *ke wai ban* and in what kinds of *ke wai ban* to enrol their children. Children's interests did play a role, but it was their continuous and sustainable progress in the education system that made some *ke wai ban* options more attractive. In some senses, *ke wai ban* was complicit in the official education system, a non-compulsory but equally decisive part of the compulsory education system that started in children's early years and functioned throughout their whole education career. The state fulfilled its responsibility for the in-school part of education and parents were held responsible for the *ke wai ban* education out of school. These two were

both important, and they combined to decide children's positions in school and the ownership of resources in the education system.

6.6 Resistance of *ke wai ban*

Even though *ke wai ban* was popular in the WeChat group, it was not met without resistance. In Lareau's work, it was mainly working-class parents who tended to give their children adequate time for free play. Their children were involved in more unstructured activities compared with their middle-class counterparts, an approach that was termed 'the accomplishment of natural growth' (Lareau, 2003). In China, it has become more complicated. In the WeChat parent group, there were reflections of the hectic lifestyles resulting from *ke wai ban*. Parents were concerned about their children's physical, social, and cognitive wellbeing and development. In section 5.3.1, Fena worried that learning the piano would interrupt their routine family outing each weekend. Parents like her worried that too much time spent on *ke wai ban* would cause an unhealthy lifestyle and reduce children's time for free exploration. Especially with those *ke wai ban* classes focusing on academic performance, parents worried that their children's lives would be invaded by education and become unbalanced.

Bi was a mother of a five-years-old boy and a one-year-old girl. Even though her son was still at preschool, she told me in the interview that she could feel the pressure from preschool for her son to learn more. She was also against *ke wai ban*, believing that it encroached on her son's time for free play and growth. She told me,

There are too many enrichment classes which the preschool encourages children to attend, which I don't like because I think it's getting rid of his childhood... I've been sitting in the open session of his *ke wai ban* in English and Chinese, and he can't concentrate because he doesn't like them, but for me it's OK... The teacher seems to be unhappy about it. But she doesn't show it to me.

(From the interview with Bi, 15 August 2016)

I then asked her, 'so you belong to the open-minded Chinese parents?'

She replied,

Haha, yeah, because I was oppressed by this education system before. Until grade three in primary school, I'll allow my son to play. But after grade three, I don't

think he'll be as naughty as now, and I'll guide him little by little into academic study, which can determine a person's future.

As Bi indicated above in the interview, age became an important framework in the compromise of the conflicts between academic intervention including *ke wai ban* and children's natural growth. Parents in the group were caught up in the dilemma of providing their children with good opportunities through *ke wai ban* and a happy childhood. Bi, on the one hand, gave her child plenty of time to play and held a relaxed view of her five-years-old's learning at preschool; on the other hand, she was clear about the future education competition her son was going to face. This situation echoes the Singaporean parents who were experiencing 'a fundamental split between letting children relax and look[ing] after their children's holistic development, and an equally strong desire to push children for academic access' (Bach & Christensen, 2017, p. 135). The split was related to a gap of the educational pedagogy, evaluations, and expectations between early years education and schooling at a later stage of life. It resulted in parents' ambiguity concerning their parenting practices and aspirations, and became a source of parents' worry and concern (Bach & Christensen, 2017), which could be seen among the parents in my group.

Some parents were empathetic towards children due to the intrusion of academic burdens into EYE. These parents, on the one hand, spent time, energy, and money sending their children to various classes; on the other hand, they were trying to find a way to strike a balance between their children's natural growth and concerted cultivation, between nature and nurture. They hardly wanted to neglect educational achievements, nor be blamed for taking away their children's childhood. As Jennifer said in the WeChat group discussion,

In my class, most parents have already been frenziedly enrolling their children in various *ke wai ban*. For many parents, enrolling children in *ke wai ban* is sometimes out of helplessness. Otherwise, they're the parents who have the inner strength to just let children play without attending any *ke wai ban*. Alternatively, they've got really good economic conditions so their children don't have to participate in competitions. Otherwise, it's just so hard to resist the trend to send children to *ke wai ban*.

(from the WeChat group conversation, 29 December 2015)

Parents in the WeChat group who were actively pursuing *ke wai ban* were also often found to be using Western education as a reference to counter the pressure they faced. Posts

shared in the WeChat group included many education practices that were branded as Western practices. On 14 December 2015, there was a post shared in the WeChat group, named '*He is the first early years tutor of Zuckerberg's daughter*'. In the post, the authors described the educational goals and aspirations of Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook. In the post, the author described how Zuckerberg and his wife were trying to give their baby the chance to learn about quantum physics by introducing Chris Ferrie's picture book *Quantum Physics for Babies*. The post claimed that the first tutor Zuckerberg hired for his child was not a person, nor did he choose to send her to any class. Instead, the first tutor was the author of a picture book. Moreover, Zuckerberg and his wife chose to read the picture book with the baby as a means of spending time with the child whilst educating her. Some parents in the WeChat group claimed that parents should spend time with their children and accompany them reading, rather than send them to *ke wai ban*.

'Western education' had become a way for parents to promote the approach of AoNG. The learning from the West, I argue in Chapter 9, was more a reflection of their own thinking and pursuits, rather than advocating for Western education. Furthermore, parents seldom mentioned in the WeChat group the class differences in Western education that were obvious in the work of Western scholars (Lareau, 2003, 2011; Vincent & Ball, 2006; Carol Vincent & Stephen J Ball, 2007; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). Many parents seemed to hold a simplified view of Western education, without mentioning the differences between classes and countries. Their views towards Western education will be connected and further discussed in Chapter 9.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the *ke wai ban* phenomenon among parents in the WeChat group. It exemplified the uniqueness of *ke wai ban* and investigated its position in Chinese EYE. With the presentation of the parents' conversations in the WeChat group and detailed description of Fena and Luli's educational choices regarding *ke wai ban*, this chapter demonstrated the rationales, contexts, and strategies, as well as dilemmas and confusion, faced when parents had to arrange their children's out-of-school learning. These parents' *ke wai ban* practices were compared and contrasted with the American parents' approaches, using Annette

Lareau's research about concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth in middle class and working class families (Lareau, 2003, 2011). I also used the notion of *suzhi* and discussed its role in Chinese parents' practice of *ke wai ban* and EYE. *Suzhi* will be further used in the following chapters to understand Chinese parents' educational choices.

This chapter provides a unique angle to delve deeper into parents' educational views and aspirations. *Ke wai ban* concerns academic opportunities beyond the official educational institutions, but it is also where parents can exert their influence and fulfil their educational ideals. Compared with public educational institutions like preschools and primary schools, *ke wai ban* is relatively less regulated by the state and is where parents can exert the most autonomy. Parents' choices around *ke wai ban* practice can reveal their educational aspirations and views. Parents' regret, confusion, as well as discussion about *ke wai ban* disclosed their own positioning in their children's educational process. Therefore, this chapter demonstrated how parents in the WeChat group had enthusiastically pursued EYE for their children with financial, time, and emotional input. In the next chapter, I will follow the parents' educational desires and explore how their strong educational aspirations were formulated and operated in the group.

Chapter 7

Managing the educational project: preparing academic learning from the early years

7.1 Introduction

In the previous section, I discussed how parents engaged with their children's education out of class. I also linked the Chinese notion of *suzhi* and analysed how *suzhi* influenced Chinese parents' educational strategies. In this chapter, I explore how parents displayed their strong educational aspirations from their children's early years. I investigate how parents positioned EYE in the entire Chinese education system. I argue that in order to understand parents' aspirations and views regarding EYE, it is necessary to consider EYE as part of the entire education project.

I start with a discussion of a mother named Meng who had started preparing for her son's *gaokao* almost 17 years before it would take place. I will then present a group conversation that pushed preparation for academic performance as early on as during the prenatal stage. The tremendous pressure of preparing for exams on children and parents in the early years had been normalised, and exams had been regarded as a level playing field that guaranteed fairness and equality. In the last section of the chapter, I will present how parents navigated the dilemma between academic pressure and children's wellbeing in EYE. Even though EYE in China has been recognised for its differences and uniqueness from the other stages of education, the exam apparatus in the Chinese education system has significant influence on the way EYE is received by parents.

7.2 ‘There have been so many early starters out there’: preparing *gaokao* from toddlerhood

This section discusses the relationship between exams, EYE, and parents’ educational desires. At the policy level, exams are not allowed in EYE, and the EYE curriculum and pedagogy are different from those in other stages of school. However, this does not mean that parents in the early years in China are immune from the pressure of schools and their various exams. In this section, I will refer to a mother named Meng who exhibited her educational aspirations and concerns when her son was just 18 months old. Like many equally aspirational yet anxious parents in this WeChat group, she treated her son’s growth as a project and started to work out a strategy for the project from an early stage in her son’s life. Meng would not miss a single opportunity to cultivate her son’s educational success from his toddlerhood, fearing that he might fall behind others at the very start of the long educational race.

Meng was a mother in the WeChat group that I had followed for some time. She loved to disclose her own stories in the group and provide advice for parenting and education, based on her experience working in a high school. I decided to interview her because even though her child was still young, she was actively involved and could contribute to the discussion with her own experience as a high-school teacher. It also reflected how an educated mother with young child perceived Chinese education and had an early start in educational preparation. When I approached her and expressed my interest to interview her, she happily agreed. Indeed, she matched my stereotype of a typical woman from the Northeast, who was outgoing, chatty, warm-hearted, and a natural socialiser. To have an interview with her was like talking with a cousin that I had known for a long time. Based on the audio call interview with her and the information gathered from the WeChat group, it was easy to establish a holistic picture of Meng’s life.

Meng was born and grew up in a city in northeast China, a region that was famous for its glorious industrial history. Traditionally, cities in the Northeast were characterised by their strong state-owned factories and other public sectors established during the Communist planned-economy period during the 1950s–1970s. Compared with southeast China,

especially along the coastal area, this area was regarded by some Chinese as more conservative and relatively immune to outside influence. In recent decades, it had suffered from a dramatic economic fall when the country embraced globalisation and established an increasingly market-oriented economy. The failure of the state-owned factories and industries in the Northeast had an impact on ordinary people's lives. Meng disclosed to me in the interview that during her teenage years, her mother was made redundant from the state-owned factory and had to re-start a new career from scratch in her middle age. Eventually, she became a taxi driver in an industry predominantly occupied by males. Meng recalled light-heartedly that life was not always easy, but her childhood was happy even though the economic situation could become strained from time to time. Meng said she performed averagely in *gaokao*, the national college entrance exams, and went to a teachers' college in a neighbouring city. Upon graduation, she went back to her hometown and was lucky to find a job in a local high school.

At the time I interviewed her, Meng had two significant roles in her life. One and half years earlier, she became a mother of a boy. She said that she was well aware that the role of mother would re-define her life path going forward. In the meantime, as a young woman in her early 30s who had graduated from a teachers' college, Meng started her career within the local public sector and had a stable and relatively promising career. She was fully employed as an administrator at a local high school and was responsible for organising various activities for students who were there to have three years' hard work before they progressed to the fierce competition of *gaokao*.

The two major roles, being a mother and a high school administrator, were not parallel in Meng's life. She confessed that her profession at the high school had a direct influence on her thinking about and aspirations for her own child-rearing practice. Witnessing the day to day life of how her students were studying and preparing for *gaokao*, maybe one of the world's toughest and most competitive exams, she had already developed an idea about what competitions her toddler would face later in life. In the interview, Meng did not conceal her concerns about the future academic pressure on her son,

I think [the reason for my early academic concern] may be because I am in the education field. I can experience [the academic pressure] more. The children I deal

with are mostly high school ones who will soon face *gaokao*. In fact, for Chinese children, the most important life-changing moment during their entire education career is *gaokao*. So it will surely be something for every parent to think about.

(From the interview with Meng, 20 September 2016)

Meng told me in the interview that it was the norm for high school teachers to rush to finish the entire three years' high school curricular contents within two years, leaving an entire year to help students review, drill and exercise in order to get the highest possible score in the final exam. Parents in her high school would also be asked to cooperate with teachers to maximise students' performance. Meng said that it was not rare in China to hear some parents, normally mothers, quit their jobs in the last year of children's high school to fully serve children's needs to ensure their best performance in *gaokao*. Parents were ready to sacrifice their careers so that their children could have a better chance in *gaokao* and gain access to high-quality educational resources and better career prospects. This was in line with many of the parents' choices in the WeChat group who temporarily suspended their career to look after their children.

The concerns and sacrifice for the sake of *gaokao* were significant ways for parents in the WeChat group to fulfil their responsibility towards their children. Indeed, *gaokao* had developed into a ritual and ceremony, whose significance seemed to go beyond the meritocratic academic selection. It embodied family aspirations for a better life, and the parents' responsibility and willingness to sacrifice. The impacts of *gaokao*, therefore, were not constrained to the three years' senior secondary school study but shaped Chinese parents' attitudes, assumptions, and aspirations towards education in children's early years. Meng said she believed, out of her direct experience at the high school, that *gaokao* and its preparation was a project that the entire family had to plan for strategically, prepare for wholeheartedly, and implement meticulously from a young age. It meant that when parents engaged in their children's education, regardless of the children's age and education stage, they would inevitably consider *gaokao*. In the early stages of her son's education, Meng had already been determined to provide him with proper preparation for future academic competition. Talking about her expectations of her child's education, Meng told me,

Regarding the expectations, I think the vast majority of parents certainly hope that their children can perform well academically. If we can be more rational, however,

I think being happy and healthy is more important. But in China, I think parents are probably more likely to choose the academic performance regarding expectations.

(From the interview with Meng, 20 September 2016)

Meng was well aware of the importance of *gaokao*. As a staff member in a high school, she witnessed how students were arranged and pushed for drill learning in order to excel in *gaokao*. Her aspirations for her child's education were influenced accordingly. She prioritised academic performance as the top concern for her son's development, even though she implied in the WeChat group that it might be wrong to conduct academic learning when the child was too young, as it was not rational. In my interview with her, she justified her concerns by relating herself to 'the vast majority of parents' in China, implying that these parents might share a similar concern with her.

For Meng, the way to prepare for her son's *gaokao*, 17 years before it would take place, started with looking for early learning classes. In the interview, she revealed that she was happy to find that in the shopping mall next to her home, an early learning centre had just opened which was said to belong to an international education chain brand. She visited it and was impressed by the education programs offered in the centre. However, she still kept going around the whole city to visit different early learning centres in the fear that she might miss a better one.

What then struck her the most was not only the variety of early learning choices on offer across the city but also the number of young parents who had already started the educational journey with their young ones. The presence of many parents and children of a similar age made her aware of how tough the competition she and her son would face in the future would be. Meng confessed,

[Being there] motivates and inspires parents, giving them a sense that education is essential. If you didn't take your children out there to see the various forms of early learning programs, you wouldn't know that there are so many families, when their children are still young, who have already taken their children out for learning. If you go there, then you will be aware that actually, there are so many early starters out there.

(From the interview with Meng, 20 September 2016)

Meng told me that she was highly motivated for her child's education, especially after her visits to the various early learning programs. Andrew Kipnis coined the term 'educational desire' in his book *Governing educational desire: culture, politics, and schooling in China* (2011a). Kipnis used the term to refer to the collective privileging of school success and exam performance by Chinese and East Asian people. For example, concerning the participants of his research in China, the parents unanimously aspired to send their children to colleges or universities. For many of them, attending colleges was not only a means to improve one's socioeconomic position in society but was the end itself. Moreover, the aspirations could be called desires because people tended to see the values and ideals of education override the value of other ambitions. Chinese parents, according to Kipnis (2011a), were ready to make sacrifices in order to accomplish educational success. Educational desire in Kipnis' work was used mainly to describe parents with senior secondary school children; my research showed that Chinese parents had developed this desire during their children's early years. It was also reinforced by peer pressure, something parents like Meng decided to embrace. Seeing many parents taking their children to early learning programs made Meng feel anxious about falling behind in education. She confessed that the peer pressure compelled her to think whether she had offered enough care and education opportunities to her son as the other parents had. This fear, according to Meng, was shared by most Chinese parents. In the interview, she asserted that,

If the education career is a long distance race, then every Chinese mother wants her child to win at the starting line.

(From the interview with Meng, 20 September 2016)

The 'starting line' for Chinese mothers in the group, however, had become earlier and earlier during these years. They believed that an earlier start was in the best interests of their children. When Meng found out that the other parents had registered in early learning programs for their children, she felt that she had already started late compared with others. The sense of competition for an increasingly earlier start was evident in the WeChat group as well. During the process of selecting a proper early learning program for her child, Meng self-responsibilised herself (Kipnis, 2011b). She held herself accountable for her child's growth and education.

Meng responsabilised herself in her child's education by getting to know and eventually taking part in the commercial educational service. Responsibilisation is a form of self-government when individuals exercise their autonomy and come to self-identify their responsibility and make active choices regarding educational options (Kipnis, 2011b). Under neoliberalism, the 'choice' denotes a regulated transfer of responsibility from the state to individuals, often realised through consumption in the educational market (Ball, 2010; Done & Murphy, 2018; Foucault, 1979; Peters, 2017). Usually, the 'choices' individuals can make are highly circumscribed (Done & Murphy, 2018). Parents in this WeChat group were increasingly expected to take responsibility themselves for the success of their children's education, as was evident in Meng's academic preparation and consideration of *gaokao*. Even though exams were excluded from the official early years curriculum, parents had to take responsibility for ensuring that their children had done enough exam preparation in the early years.

Meng was actively seeking out information about early learning programs to make her choice as informed as possible. In both the WeChat group and offline life, Meng would gather information to make her educational choice as informed as possible. In the meantime, she was critical of the nature and effectiveness of such services after having done some research. She once mentioned in the WeChat group that these early learning classes were more for adults than for children, as children were too young to understand them. Moreover, when she spoke with other parents who had already joined the courses, she said got a feeling that the learning programs were not as satisfying and magical as they advertised. Therefore, instead of her initial intention of attending three classes per week, she opted to go once a week. Meng was a critical, informed, and reflective parent. However, despite all of her concerns, she still decided to get her son involved in the early learning programs, as she did not want to risk his falling behind the others, nor did she want to be blamed for the lack of investment at an early age. She said in the interview,

In China, as far as I know, most parents will enrol their children in various classes when their children are as young as four or five years old, regardless of whether they have the money or not. Also, if they have extra money, they will send their children to these services earlier. Indeed, parents will make every effort to invest in education. If you heard that other parents around you were registering for the early learning classes at a very young age, then you'd think that you had to take a

look at them as well. Then when you took your children to the classes, you'd say 'wow, so many children are here already. Then it is imperative for me to send my children here, too.' Haha!

(From the interview with Meng, 20 September 2016)

Parental responsibility had defined Meng's educational views and practice. At the early learning classes, she felt the pressure from other parents whose children had already made progress from a very young age. As a high school administrator, she witnessed the fierce competition from the other end of the school education before *gaokao*. Therefore, despite some concern about her son's happiness and wellbeing, Meng was determined to provide him with educational opportunities from the very start. Academic performance constituted her top concern in fulfilling the role of a parent. Furthermore, Meng asserted the legitimacy of the practice, claiming that wealth does not determine whether or not parents partake in this approach, but rather only how early they do.

As EYE before the age of six was not part of compulsory education, many parents' attempts to start education early had not been intervened by the government. Instead, parents in the WeChat group developed a sense of responsibility to start education by themselves. They actively sought information about the early learning programs. Furthermore, they developed an understanding of the future competitions faced by their children. Meng was determined to join the early learning classes once she discovered that other parents of young children had started learning earlier than she would have expected.

Why was Meng, the mother of an 18-month-old child who was not even able to speak fluently, anxious about education, even projecting her education outlook all the way towards *gaokao*, which would take place over 15 years later? Why did *gaokao* matter not only for the teenagers who were directly affected but also early years learners and their families? For the Chinese, *gaokao* could directly determine which university children would attend. The stratification of different universities children attended then would to a large extent determine their future careers and socioeconomic positions in society. Education was a project parents had to manage strategically from early on. To get a satisfying result in *gaokao*, parents had to make every effort right from the early years. However, starting early

might not be enough; it was a battle that parents had to fight along their children's educational path.

Even though EYE dominated the discussions among the parents in this WeChat group, parents still spent time discussing the exams their children would face more than a decade later. Many of the parents in the group had felt the pressure and begun the preparation for the exams when their children were only in their early years stage. In the sections that follow, I will look at how parents in the WeChat group managed the educational project, marked by several key exams, from the early years.

7.3 One exam leads to another: managing the continuous pressure

Getting a good result in *gaokao* was not an easy task. One had to compete in a series of competitive exams through each step of the educational path. Considering the large number – usually several millions – of *gaokao* candidates and the limited places available in renowned universities, the children and their families had to take extraordinary efforts from early years. They believed that children who started earlier could ultimately go further. For some parents in the group, this meant that education could start even before the children were born. In a group conversation about how to improve children's interest in reading, parents mentioned the idea of prenatal education.

Jixi:

I just talked about reading techniques to you. Actually, you know what, my child is not born yet. Haha. I just talked with my own reflection.

U-baby:

But you did sound very experienced. Are you a mother-to-be?

Jixi:

I could talk because I also came from that age and I talked according to how I wish I could have been taught. Yes, I am pregnant and a mother-to-be.

Golden Bear:

@Jixi, you can actually do some reading for the prenatal education. I am pregnant now as well and I am listening to the Chinese classics these days.

Jixi:

It seems that many more mothers are now adopting prenatal education. We should create a WeChat group for prenatal education.

(From WeChat group conversations, 27 January 2016)

In the conversations above, parents like Jixi talked about education before the birth of the child. Her enthusiasm for education reflected Chinese parents' commitment to education. They would not miss a single education opportunity. This WeChat parent group had quite a few parents, like Jixi and Golden Bear, who were parents-to-be but chose to join the group to prepare for their new roles as both parents and educators. They started even earlier than Meng and prolonged the educational project. Those parents used prenatal education to fulfil their responsibilities, expecting the foetuses to be educated and have an edge before they were born.

In China, each of the selection processes in education was important and relevant to *gaokao*, so parents could not afford to neglect any of them. As Emma said,

It is like, you as a parent have to ensure that your junior secondary school is good, as it will influence your kids' performance in *zhongkao* [senior secondary school entrance exams]. If you cannot get into a key senior secondary school via *zhongkao*, it means you have no hope in *gaokao* [college entrance exams].

(From WeChat group conversations, 29 January 2016)

For these parents, every stage of their children's educational career was critical. The success of one step would be relevant to the performance of the next. From preschools to primary schools, then to junior secondary schools, senior secondary schools, and eventually university, parents and children had to work together to ensure they could get into an ideal place to study in each step of the journey. Only in this way could parents weave a safety net to complete their children's educational project.

There are three main exams children have to take in their educational career in China. They are *xiao sheng chu*, *zhongkao* and *gaokao*. A detailed description of the three main exams in the Chinese education system can be found in section 2.3. Preparation for these exams was an essential aspect of EYE in the WeChat group. Success in one exam would be relevant to the quality of education one could receive in the next phase. Eventually, every phase of education and participation in the corresponding exam would potentially influence

students' performance in *gaokao* and determine whether or not they could get into a good university that promised a bright career.

Throughout history, exam-centred education has constituted the basis for China's meritocratic education system. As a governing tool, exams in China have a long history (Kipnis, 2011a, 2011b; Suen, 2005). Emperors in ancient China used *keju* to test people's knowledge of Confucian classics and to select scholar-officials for the government (I have provided contextual knowledge of *keju* in section 2.1.2). Nowadays, Chinese students are entitled to participate in *gaokao*, the national college entrance exams that are held once a year, to gain access to their desired universities. The scores of *gaokao* will determine their higher education prospects and their ensuing career. In order to succeed in *gaokao*, schools across the country adopt a similar pedagogy that emphasises exemplary teaching, rote learning, memorisation, and discipline (W.-M. Tu, 1984; B. Wu & Devine, 2017). Some features of exam preparation, like recitals of Confucian classics, the perfection of Chinese calligraphy, and constraints on one's desire for fun, have been embraced as virtues and desired qualities in a child (Sum, 2018; B. Wu & Devine, 2017). Preparation for the exams has become the engine for Chinese people's educational aspirations and is internalised in parents' mind and action.

The preparation of *gaokao* and the various high-stakes exams before it was not an easy job. As demonstrated in Meng's story in the previous section, from the early stage of education, parents in this WeChat group had to make decisions that would be relevant to the various exams. Duan, mother of a two-year-old child, said,

Things keep changing and everybody has his or her own fate. A decade later my son will participate in *gaokao*, and who knows what the policy will be then? We can only try our best from right now.

(From WeChat group conversations, 9 March 2016)

One way to prepare for the various exams was to enrol children in various early learning classes like Maths Olympics to enhance one's competitiveness in their educational career. Tsan Tsan, a mother who had a two-year-old daughter, discussed the necessity of Maths Olympics.

Does *gaokao* test what's learned in Maths Olympics? Why ask young children to learn it? If children are interested, that would be great. But what if children don't like it?

(From WeChat group conversations, 21 February 2016)

Yin Yin, mother of a two-year-old boy, replied,

You need the Olympics for *xiao sheng chu* (primary school to junior secondary school selection test). My kid is still very small but I heard that from my colleagues.

(From WeChat group conversations, 21 February 2016)

Tsan Tsan put the child's interest at the forefront. As a mother of a two-year-old, she cast doubt on the necessity of the Maths Olympics, which was popular in China. However, Yin Yin, another mother of a two-year-old, justified it: even though the subject was not directly tested in *gaokao*, it would potentially influence *xiao sheng chu*, another selection in the Chinese education system that stratified students and influenced children's transitions from primary schools to junior secondary schools. For parents who were unsatisfied with the junior secondary school in their catchment area, participation in the *xiao sheng chu* was a necessary step for their children to get into a more prestigious one. Therefore, as the previous chapter suggested, many parents had to bring their children to the various *ke wai ban* for the preparation of *xiao sheng chu*. Maths Olympics was a popular *ke wai ban* option as it was a frequent subject tested in the selection process.

From prenatal education to *gaokao*, parents and their children (or foetuses) in this Little MBA WeChat group faced educational pressure from before the child's birth all the way up to *gaokao*. Using this online space, parents sought peer support to relieve the stress; in the meantime, they might also circulate the pressure and responsabilise themselves in fulfilling their role as parents. In the parents' everyday lives, they could see and feel the pressure. This further made them reflect upon the nature of education. Cool mom, who had a two-year-old child, said in the WeChat group,

Behind where I live, there's a high school. You can see that when *gaokao* finally came, students got really crazy as they had been depressed and overshadowed by it for too long. They threw and dropped their test papers from the corridor of their teaching building to the ground to release the pressure brought by the exams and

screamed around. You know, this was a key high school and parents had big aspirations for the children. The school then used the broadcast system to ‘crack down’ on the students, requesting them to stay inside their classrooms. Dear all, what do you think of it? If you were given another time to participate in *gaokao*, would you study in the same way as you did back then? Why? What did *gaokao* bring to you?

(From WeChat group conversation, 6 April 2016)

Tone replied,

To be frank, it was a tough time back then... but I do feel that around the time of *gaokao*, I was more knowledgeable compared with other stages in my life. But if I could go back to that time again, I’d hope I’d be more mature. I would love to take more initiative and adopt a practice-based learning approach, rather than merely focusing on the knowledge in textbooks.

(From WeChat group conversation, 6 April 2016)

Parents understood that preparing the various exams was arduous work and children had to bear extraordinary pressure. They wanted to have a practice-based learning approach rather than merely conduct rote-learning. Also, parents were concerned about the problems implicated in the high-stakes exams. For these parents, their attitudes towards *gaokao* and the various exams were complicated. On the one hand, they genuinely felt that preparation of exams facilitated knowledge learning and they would spare no efforts to help their children succeed in the various exams; on the other hand, they were also aware that exams caused many problems, including stress and insufficient chances to put knowledge into practice. They were therefore conflicted about the significance of *gaokao* and the series of exams, and the potential harms they could inflict on children. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the *keju* exam was to blame for China’s backwardness and was effectively abolished in 1905 as part of a failed attempt to save the Imperial dynasty of Qing. A hundred years later, *gaokao* today is likely to bear a similar criticism. In section 7.4 and 7.5, I will discuss how parents in the WeChat group navigated and defended the exam system. Afterwards, I will focus on how Chinese parents developed their own logic to address the dilemma they were faced with in EYE.

7.4 ‘Competing in *gaokao* is at least something we can afford’: exams as equal opportunities

As a controversial educational phenomenon, *gaokao* frequently sparked discussion in the WeChat group. On the 9th of March 2016, a post was widely circulated in the group. It was allegedly put forward by Mo Yan, the 2012 Nobel Literature Prize Laureate, on Chinese education reform. The post purportedly claimed that Mo Yan proposed the abolition of some exams and the reform of *gaokao*. The post was named ‘*the Strongest Voice In the National Congress Sessions*’. It said,

Mo Yan proposed to shorten compulsory education in China from 12 years to 10 years. Also, he favoured the abolition of *xiao sheng chu* and *zhongkao* exams. Furthermore, in the post Mo Yan allegedly proposed to cancel the grading system of universities in China, and urged the country to borrow experience from Germany and other European countries to allow students to freely choose from academic-oriented colleges and vocational ones. Mo Yan said that under the pressure of the exam-oriented education system, most students became sick of schooling. The current education resulted in extra tuition out of school, the selection of schools, and many other social issues. Education is pivotal to the nation’s survival. No other nation in the world would make a joke of education as we did. For the sake of our children and our nation, please support Mo Yan. The educational reform is imminent. Don't just press like. Please circulate it!

(a WeChat post forwarded by Susan in the on 9 March 2016)

That morning, the widely circulated but non-authored post was forwarded by Susan, a mother of a seven-year-old boy. Whether this post faithfully revealed Mo Yan’s ideas was highly doubtful. The post adopted a highly simplistic view of education and tried to arouse people’s emotion rather than encourage rational thinking. The last sentence, which was written as ‘don’t just press like, please circulate it’, was a popular way to persuade people to circulate and share information in WeChat and did not sound like a motion put forward by a Noble Literature prize laureate at the National Congress. Plus, the post had made mistakes on some fundamental facts. For example, it said that Mo Yan proposed that compulsory education should be shortened from 12 to 10 years, when in fact, compulsory education lasts only nine years at the national level.

Parents in the WeChat group also cast doubt on the authenticity of the post. Idle, a mother in the group, commented on the post soon after it was forwarded, that ‘whether or not it

was from Mo Yan was uncertain'. However, parents did not seem to be bothered by its authenticity. Soon after Susan shared the post, parents in the WeChat group started a heated discussion around the proposal and began to share their views on the educational reform, exams, and *suzhi*.

The fake news and biased information that are part of WeChat and social media should be recognised, rather than left unmentioned. In the next chapter, I will present more WeChat posts whose contents might also be biased. However, in this research, the authenticity of the posts was relatively insignificant and it was beyond the scope of this research to investigate the formation of fake news in social media. Instead, it was the follow-up to these posts that was of more interest to me. Back to the WeChat group, Jennifer did not agree with abolishing the exam system,

If education is evaluated by *suzhi* rather than exam scores, the poor will have even more burdens. To go to school and prepare for the exams is at least something we can afford. However, if children are evaluated by the extracurricular skills and abilities like piano, tennis, golf, scuba diving, horse riding, etc., I cannot imagine how much more parents will have to spend on education.

(From WeChat group conversation, 9 March 2016)

Parents realised that the current education system, which was exam-oriented, could provide a relatively fair opportunity where children of different family backgrounds could compete. Particularly, it enabled children from ordinary family backgrounds to change their fate. The discussion continued,

Pan pan:

Therefore, *gaokao* is the only pathway for us who are the grassroots of society. You need proper institutions and an environment to succeed and realise your values. Nowadays, *gaokao* is the proper institution and is relatively fair.

Jennifer:

The poor like *gaokao* and the rich barely care about it.

Pan pan:

The proportion of people who make achievements by attending university far outweigh those who do not. It is my generation's responsibility to succeed in *gaokao* so that the next generation won't suffer from it.

Jennifer:

I belong to the poor and I am about to complete the mission of my generation, to accumulate some resources for the next generation.

Pan pan:

Hey, super-rich people, how come you still compete with us in *gaokao* for university places? You have got so many resources and we are left with the only path.

Ouyan:

Today even for university graduates, it's not easy to find a job.

Jennifer:

Three generations are enough to produce a gentleman. For the poor, we really have to work hard! ...

Tone:

The super-rich have to study as well.

Zhuo:

Now the super-rich pay a lot of attention to education as well. Many academically-excellent children have super good backgrounds. They are indeed the winners of life.

Pan pan:

The super-rich can study abroad, go to Europe or America; they can learn the arts, can attend *ke wai ban*... and for us, if the pathway of *gaokao* is blocked, we have left few opportunities.

...

Pan pan:

Competing in exams like *gaokao* is at least something we can afford. If we all play with the idea of *suzhi*, or extracurricular activities, the poor are doomed.

(From WeChat group conversation, 9 March 2016)

Parents in this WeChat group emphasised that *gaokao* was a life-changing moment that provided opportunities particularly useful for ordinary people with limited opportunities. Also, they justified their favourable attitudes towards *gaokao* by claiming that through this relatively fair competition, children and their families could achieve upward mobility. In the conversations above, parents justified their efforts and aspirations for *gaokao* as it provided them with a platform where they could compete with well-off families to realise upward social mobility. This was consistent with Meng's effort in choosing a proper early learning

program to prepare for the long-term *gaokao*. Some parents claimed that if their children were evaluated by *suzhi*, the pathway to renowned universities and the promising career brought by them would be blocked. Here, *suzhi* education was placed against the exam-centred education system. The former seemed to be gentrified and belong to the territory of the well-off, and the latter entailed more equal opportunities and was open to the public. Parents' embrace of *gaokao*, in essence, was their aspirations for fair and equal educational opportunities. However, it does not mean that *suzhi* was ignored by parents. In the next section, I will further complicate parents' educational aspirations and demonstrate how parents were navigating between the different educational values.

7.5 Managing the educational dilemma in the early years

In the previous chapter, I introduced the concept of *suzhi* in Chinese education. It is a widely used rhetoric that embodies the various values pursued in the country's educational reform. Preparation of *gaokao* and the various exams brings not only knowledge and skills that would be tested in the final testing paper but also cultivates children's certain dispositions and characters. Because of the pervasive power of *suzhi* in Chinese education, parents in the WeChat group would evaluate *gaokao* and the various forms of exams to investigate whether these exams could effectively promote their children's *suzhi*. Lele, one of the parents in the Little MBA group, said in the group conversation,

School education is for the masses; whose advantages are that you can improve the overall citizens' *suzhi*. And through it, the state can have governable citizens. If you want to overcome the disadvantages inherent in the system, you have to seek outside resources.

(From the WeChat parents group conversations 23 October 2015)

Lele commented on the public and political features of public education. In her statement, Lele dichotomised 'the overall' and 'the individual'. She recognised that as the national exam, *gaokao* was used by the state as a governing tool to regulate its citizens and improve the overall *suzhi* of its citizens. She also believed that it should be the responsibility of the individual family to draw on external resources to overcome the problems inherent in the education system, including the various fee-paying *ke wai ban* explored in Chapter 6. By preparing *gaokao* and a series of exams from the early years, parents have sanctified the exams, making the preparation a family ritual to be conducted by most Chinese households.

Throughout the entire childhood, parents not only accompany their children to go through their first life-changing moments but also instil them with the desired characteristics, attitudes, and skills for education in general.

In the WeChat group, parents could communicate and discuss their educational desires, anxieties, and confusion. Despite their strikingly different backgrounds and attitudes towards education, they shared some similarities. Parents aspired for their children to achieve academic excellence but they also expected their children to be well-rounded. Even though many parents agreed with the fairness of the system, they were aware of the problems associated with the exam system. It was a dilemma that most parents were faced with. The parents' widely shared dilemma was further manifested in the following discussion in the group about the reason why their children were tagged as being 'shy' and 'quiet'.

Yaya:

The reason that children do not raise hands in class lies in two factors. Firstly, they are unsure of the answers and afraid that they may give the wrong ones. Secondly, the teachers may seldom ask him/her to answer.

Susan:

Thanks. It seems that I have to talk to the teachers then.

Amy's mom:

Some children do not like to raise their hands. It may merely be their natural character. In my opinion, parents do not have to care too much about it.

Yaya:

You are welcome, @Susan. Teachers have a massive influence before grade 3. Also, you can practice more at home. You should contact the teachers at home as well. My child is also in the first grade this year. Last semester, she just experienced all of these. We didn't learn any foundational knowledge in preschools. Until I visited the teacher I didn't realise that there were only two kids in the class who had not learnt any foundational knowledge in preschool. As the teachers were teaching really fast, my daughter struggled to catch up. As a result, the poor kid did not like to raise her hand. Accordingly, teachers and classmates paid less attention to her. In fact, my daughter was very outgoing. Once in preschool, she hosted a 1.5 hour long gala in a celebration and she never got nervous. A month into primary school, however, I felt that she did not get much passion for learning. So I decided then that I should directly visit the teachers. They commented that my child had a reserved and shy character in nature. According to

the teacher, she did not like to talk, nor did she raise her hand in class to speak. After communication with her teachers, I first came back home to help with her academic learning so that she would know the answers to the questions. Then, I asked the teachers to pay more attention to her and to ask her to answer questions to build up her confidence. After a semester, at the beginning of this new academic year, the teacher sent a private message saying that my child had improved so much and become much more confident. This is my own experience. Maybe it is useful for you.'

Cui:

Oh, thanks for sharing! Therefore, it is better to pre-study the course of grade 1 of primary school to have some foundational knowledge? Mine is four years old.

Yaya:

Oh, you must. This is definitely the recommendation of someone like me, who has gone through all of this. We are studying at a key primary school. Oh, last semester, it was like nirvana⁹, so much suffering.

Wind:

I feel that the key in preschool is to cultivate children's learning dispositions and abilities like concentration. I don't recommend learning about the primary school stuff at the preschool stage. I think temporarily lagging behind in primary school is not a problem.

...

Susan:

Thanks for sharing your experience @ Yaya. From a young age my kid had not been shy or afraid of strangers. However, in primary school, she was branded as shy and unconfident. The same case as yours!

Yaya:

Our teacher in primary school claimed that I should not give full freedom to my kid when she was in preschool. She had been playing all the time. And I had not prepared at all when sending her to the most competitive primary school...

Wind:

The most terrible thing is that for those parents aiming to give the best education to children, they send their children to the most progressive preschools with a Montessori or Waldorf approach, then afterwards they put children in the most academically competitive primary schools. Oh, these parents are murdering their own kids.

(From WeChat group conversations 23 January 2016)

⁹ Nirvana is a state of peace and happiness in Buddhism and Hinduism, usually achieved after cycles of suffering.

The parents' discussion above originated from their concerns over children's 'shyness'. Some parents attributed the 'shyness' to the education system and refused to accept it as their children's natural character. Yaya's child spent time in preschool playing rather than conducting pre-learning of the foundational knowledge of primary schools. Therefore, once in primary school, she struggled to catch up with other children who had learnt the knowledge beforehand. Therefore, the once outgoing and brave girl got less attention and gradually became shy and quiet. Luckily, the mother actively intervened and helped her child's learning at home to remedy the 'disadvantages' of not learning beforehand.

In the above conversation, a link emerged between children's early academic learning and their character building. Children's being 'shy' or 'quiet' was attributed to the neglect of parents' early academic intervention. The prescriptions for these children's 'shyness', suggested by Yaya, who had herself suffered due to the lack of pre-learning like her child, was to pre-study the course of the primary school curriculum in preschool so that children could have a comparable level of knowledge to their peers. In this way, they could participate more effectively and have a fair chance with their classmates at answering the questions posed by the teachers, and gradually build up their confidence. These parents saw academic learning as being directly related with and complementary, rather than contradictory, of cultivating the neoliberal personality traits of being confident and outgoing. Without parents' active academic intervention in the early years, children risked being marginalised in the mainstream school environment. Consequently, teachers might pay less attention to the children, which negatively affected their character development. That also explained the rationale of Meng's search of academic learning program for her young toddler in section 7.2 and Jixi's participation of older children's topic when she was just pregnant in section 7.3.

In the meantime, this idea of early academic learning was challenged by parents like Wind who claimed that the cultivation of learning dispositions was more important than learning actual knowledge in preschool. Wind also noticed that there existed a considerable gap in values between top quality preschools and primary schools. For the top preschools, it was the progressive ideas that made them distinctive; however, it was the competitive learning approach that enabled the top primary schools to excel. As Wind claimed, parents who were

pursuing both top preschools and schools had to deal with these split ideas. Wind even felt that by aiming to send children to the two kinds of top institutions, these parents were in some way ‘murdering’ their kids. However, her ideas seemed to be ignored by other parents in the group and her comments were largely left unfollowed. It was how to avoid children’s academic disadvantages and the associated influence on their character building that parents were most concerned with.

Murdering their own children was indeed strong rhetoric. However, it made explicit the dilemma that also featured in previous studies on Chinese parents. In order to succeed in a series of exams in the Chinese education system, parents developed educational desire and wanted their children to be industrious and disciplined. They wanted their children to adopt the ‘soft skills’ like obedience, memorisation, and rote learning (Kipnis 2011a). As shown in this chapter, children were expected to follow their predecessors who sat the imperial exam of *keju*, who were ready to sacrifice their joy of life for preparation of the exams, conduct dull rote learning, and follow the exemplars. In the meantime, parents had aspirations for their children to be creative, entrepreneurial, flexible, and critical so that they could become competitive in the global economy. These two sets of skills sometimes conflicted with each other. As Kipnis (2011b) said,

The contradictory mix of liberalism and authoritarianism in the education for quality [education for quality is one form of translation of *suzhi* education] literature exists not just in the content of what is to be taught, but also in the manner in which the content is to be taught. It influences not only the contents but also the pedagogy. (p.295)

Therefore, how can parents deal with the conflicts? Previous researchers used the notion of a ‘double bind’ to make sense of the dilemma, conflicting educational requirements, and expectations faced by the individuals (Xu, 2017). Parents who were faced with the ‘double bind’ were expected to observe two sets of values which were usually inconsistent and conflicting with each other. For example, Bach and Christensen (2017) used the ‘double bind’ to understand how Singaporean parents were torn up by their positions in the education reform. Parents were explicitly encouraged to be supportive, flexible, and empathetic with their children but the education system constantly reminded parents of the realities their children had to face, including the preparation for the high-stakes exams.

Therefore, parents felt that they were split by the conflicting expectations of their roles in education.

Differing from previous studies which emphasised the 'dilemma' or 'double bind' faced by Chinese parents, in my research parents developed their own logic and found a way to navigate the conflicts between different sets of values. For them, the neoliberal values of being confident and a heavy academic input in the early years were consistent. Academic excellence and preparation were justified as necessary to the cultivation of neoliberal characteristics. With good academic performance, children would get more attention from the teachers. On the contrary, the neglect of academic performance could result in the children's lack of neoliberal characteristics like confidence. Parents in my research aimed to produce children who were spontaneous, creative, and entrepreneurial, while meticulous, hardworking, obedient, and docile. Their educational aspirations integrated both Confucian traditions and Western neoliberal influences. And they made the two sets of values coherent in their narrative in the WeChat group. Going back to the previous chapter, parents in this group also spent time and money on the various kinds of *ke wai ban* in order to cultivate all-round, creative, and entrepreneurial children. These two chapters combined demonstrate that successful parents in China today had to manage the education project skilfully between academic excellence and neoliberal values. And they had to ensure their children embraced all of the values, regardless of their inconsistencies.

7.6 Conclusion

In his book, Kipnis (2011a) addressed the causes of educational desire and investigated the complexities of exam culture in China and how Chinese governments, from Imperial to modern times, had been using education and exams as a governing complex to achieve their agenda. For Kipnis, the factors influencing Chinese parents' educational desires were not separated but interrelated. In my research, I found that to understand Chinese parents' views and aspirations of EYE, it was mandatory to have a wider view of the entire education system to explore how parents managed it.

Chinese education for many parents in the WeChat group implied a series of selective exams. For Chinese children in EYE, excellent academic records could help them progress

into better primary and junior high schools, later leading them into better universities that promised a good career. Each step of the education system entailed a selection process that was assessed by merit, based on students' exam performance. Thus, parents in the WeChat group dared not neglect the importance of academic performance from the start. Even though some parents were aware that pursuing academic performance in the early years might come at the price of happiness and wellbeing, they still regarded it as a guarantee for a successful life. These parents' strong educational aspirations became a way for them to exercise their responsibility.

What these parents had in common was that they all felt the educational pressure which operated on their preparation of the various levels of exams. These parents had decided to take responsibility, as well as actions, to tackle the pressure and avoid educational failure by starting structured education earlier and earlier. In section 7.2, *gaokao*, the national college entrance exam, was influencing Meng's educational views and practice, more than 15 years before her child would sit the exam. In order to succeed in *gaokao*, parents like Meng had to go through a variety of exams and competitive selections, from *xiao sheng chu* at the end of primary school to *zhongkao* and *gaokao*. In section 7.3, I addressed how the various exams in the Chinese educational system were interrelated and how parents in the Little MBA group had to carefully prepare for each of the exams. However, preparation of the various exams only made up one dimension of parents' education aspirations and desires. Parents did not submissively take on the role of helpers of their children's exams. Rather, they criticised the exam-centred education and cast doubt on the real benefits it could bring to their children. In section 7.4, I showed how parents defended the exam as a fair way to attain educational achievements. Even though parents aspired for a balanced, all-rounded education for their children, they would not abandon *gaokao* and the equal opportunities it promised. In section 7.5, I presented how the parents developed their own theories to navigate between the seemingly conflicting educational values.

Furthering the discussion on parents' financial, emotional, and temporal investment in their children's *ke wai ban* in the previous chapter, I argue that the Chinese parents in the group put EYE as part of their education projects. In order to understand parents' views and aspirations of EYE, it is mandatory to understand how EYE has been positioned in the entire

education project. This chapter explained how parents managed the education project from the early years and how they made sense of the conflicts inherent in it. In order to further address the tensions of different educational values, parents referred to Western education, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

Western education for Chinese parents: learning from the West

Nowadays there are so many media outlets that only worship foreign things and despise the Chinese. Especially in the educational fields, people criticise Chinese schools and Chinese parents all day long, which makes me feel sick. Some people seem to think that the moon in the West is bigger and fuller, but the US are simply making use of our resources. Especially the US – they cannot wait to suppress your development in every possible area... Everywhere you go in China, you hear people praise children in the West, and you hear people say that Chinese kids lag behind in every aspect...

(From CiCi in the WeChat group conversation 22/01/2016)

Above are CiCi's comments regarding Western education during a conversation that took place in the Little MBA WeChat group. As CiCi suggested, nowadays Western education has become a hot topic among parents in China. For CiCi, it seemed that the Chinese parents tended to exaggerate the role of US and UK education. She criticised that they adored education in the Western countries as if the 'the moon in the West is bigger and fuller'. Indeed, in the WeChat group, Western education was frequently referred to by parents. Even though this group was set up by Chinese parents to discuss EYE in the Chinese context, the topic of Western education frequently dominated the discussions. Parents compared Western education with Chinese EYE in their daily conversation. This did not necessarily suggest that those parents had developed a pure interest in Western education. In fact, their views, perceptions, and attitudes towards Western education were like a mirror reflecting their own views, aspirations, and experiences of Chinese education. Therefore, exploration of how Western education was represented by the parents in the WeChat group could reveal parents' experiences, views, and aspirations concerning Chinese EYE, which contribute to understanding the research questions of the thesis.

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that parents' educational aspirations and desires, exemplified by their preparations for various exams during their children's growth, had shaped their educational practice. I also tried to explicate the parents' dilemma concerning

the ambiguity of the otherwise dichotomous split between *suzhi* and exam-centred education. In this chapter, I will interrogate how parents in this WeChat group perceived Western education and how their perspectives were produced by and related to Chinese education. By presenting posts on Western education and parents' discussions of it on WeChat, I argue that parents' perceptions of Western education in WeChat opened windows for understanding their own perceptions of Chinese EYE. This chapter also aims to understand the relationship between parents' perceptions of Western education and their agentic choices to act on their responsibility for their children's education.

In the following parts of the chapter, I will start with a brief introduction of the different constructs of Western education in the WeChat group posts. I will then move to the posts on UK and US education shared in the WeChat group and analyse their contents and meanings. Responsibilisation theory will be borrowed to understand these parents' views and aspirations towards Chinese early years education, and their understandings of their own roles in their children's education process.

8.1 Different constructs of Western education in the WeChat group

The most significant difference that lies between Chinese and Western education systems is that the Chinese emphasise the success of the schools while in Europe and the US, they value the success of the students.

(Teacher Lin, from WeChat group conversation 12/02/2016)

The quotation above was taken from a group conversation in WeChat. A parent was commenting on the difference between Chinese and American education and used Western education as a comparative point to understand Chinese education. Western education was a term heavily used in the WeChat group as an umbrella to refer to the education of various Western countries mentioned by parents in the WeChat group. The Anglophone countries, including the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada were most frequently mentioned.

In this quotation, and in many more to come in the following sections in the chapter, Chinese education was placed at the opposite end of the spectrum to Western education. However, they were also complementary and interconnected with each other. In the

following sections of this chapter, I will interrogate parents' different understandings of Western education and then compare and analyse its different constructions.

8.1.1 Educating Chinese children in the West: the advantages of Western education

Western education was constructed by parents in the WeChat group in different ways due to the parents' diverse backgrounds. Indeed, the parents' different cultural backgrounds and life experiences had significantly shaped the views these parents held towards Western education and influenced how they related Western education to themselves. Some parents had direct experience and relatively sustained involvement with Western education. These parents might have received degrees in the West and lived in the West for an extended period of time. Together with their own children, these parents had to deal with Western educational institutions in their daily life. Despite the familiarity these parents had developed with Western education, they were usually very familiar with Chinese education as well. Being brought up in a Chinese way had left a deep cultural imprint on them. Many of these parents had also had their children educated in China for some time before entering a Western educational institution. Thus, they had developed various degrees of insight into both education systems. Sometimes, they discussed Chinese education by referring to Western education, based on their direct experience.

For example, Fang, a mother whose child had recently transferred from China to a school in England, commented on what the Chinese could learn from Western education in the interview,

Home learning is something we can learn from. From very young, children are enabled to conduct independent learning... It's like they learn to research from very young... Another thing is fostering children's civic awareness and teaching them how to deal with people. It's about character building, which falls short in Chinese education... But it's hands-on learning and character education that I think we should particularly learn from the West: we have to learn how to adapt to society and learn how to communicate with other people.

(Interview with Fang 23/07/2016)

For Fang, Western education valued independence, hands-on experience, and character building, concepts which were missing from the Chinese education system. Additionally, she mentioned the cultivation of civic awareness. Therefore, her experience of engaging directly with Western education brought to her attention what

she deemed to be lacking in Chinese education. These points were to various extents repeatedly mentioned in the WeChat group in both the parents' conversations and the posts shared in the group. Fang also seemed to have a high regard for the informal home learning common in Western countries. However, in her interview, she also doubted the efficiency and effectiveness of group learning in her child's school in England, suggesting that China might outperform in this regard. She did emphasise that the home learning approach in the English education system fostered children's independence and creativity, which China should learn from others. Fang's perceptions of Western education were mainly positive. These attitudes were largely shared by Dana, a mother who lived in Australia and was educating her son there.

Dana was a member of the WeChat group who disclosed many of her stories to me and other members in the group conversation. As an education practitioner, she was also adept at expressing her views on education. Dana was a single Chinese mother based in a small town in Southeast Australia. She earned her Master's degree in early childhood education in one of the most prestigious universities in Australia before setting up her own business focusing on Sino-Australian educational exchange. In her first years in Australia, she suffered from separation from her son Neo, a six-year-old boy who was being cared for by his paternal grandparents in China.

After settling down in Australia, she brought Neo to Australia and sent him to a local private primary school. Dana's academic training in a Western country, working experience dealing with Chinese children who engaged in exchange programs in Australia, and now her own child's direct involvement with local education, all combined to shape her views on Australian and Chinese education. In my interview with her, she brought up three points that differentiated Western education from that in China.

The first one is that Western education pays attention to overall abilities. The cultivation of seemingly soft abilities can be hugely influential in the future; on the other hand, Chinese education pays attention to the hard skills.

(Interview with Dana 13/08/2016)

Here, Dana brought in a distinction between the education of 'soft skills' and 'hard skills'. The former referred to the education of values, dispositions, characters, and morals which

were usually acquired by non-academic, informal activities; the latter was about knowledge and skills, usually acquired by academic, in-class activities. For Dana, Chinese education placed too much emphasis on the latter and neglected the former. The idea of the emphasis on the 'soft skills' of Western education and its relative lack in China was echoed by other parents like Fang who claimed that teachers did not give enough credit to civic awareness, moral development, and character building. Ironically, the 'soft skills' of the character building was paramount in traditional Confucian education which highlighted education of morality and character and de-emphasised the 'hard skills' of practical knowledge (Bai, 2017; Sum, 2018). Conversely, these days the focus on the study of academic knowledge and the neglect of morals and character building has been criticised by the public.

Suzhi education reform, discussed in the previous chapters, required educators to pay attention to students' overall development rather than narrowly focusing on academics. It also embodied the cultivation of students' characters and the development of morality. The campaign for the promotion of *suzhi* education was neither a mere borrowing from the West nor a return to the traditional Confucian humanity education. Instead, *suzhi* education was based on traditional Confucian values, but also embraced significant Western values that represented neoliberal ideals (Kipnis, 2011b). Therefore, it might not be that Chinese education lacked the cultivation of 'soft skills' but more that the 'soft skills' advocated in the current Chinese education system were not the same kind of 'soft skills' fostered in the West. For Fang and Dana, Western education valued creativity, entrepreneurship, and independence. It is this set of soft values that they believed China lacked, which might explain the reason they joined the group named Little MBA. In this particular WeChat parent group, cultivation of entrepreneurship and creativity was at the core of its educational pursuit. Parents' view of Western education and their motivations of learning from the group both reflected their expectations of Chinese education.

At times, 'Western soft skills' were explicitly promoted in China, though they had the potential to conflict with other indigenous soft skills that were equally credited in education. For example, Fang praised the independent learning in the West. For her, learning by oneself and developing critical thinking were important parts of education.

However, while independence was encouraged in Chinese EYE and in the *suzhi* education campaign, there was also a mandate in Chinese education that required students to obey the ruling ideology of Communism and to love the Chinese Communist Party. It was doubtful whether the two different kinds of 'soft values', one asking students to be independent and creative and the other asking them to be obedient and patriotic, could coexist. Therefore, to some extent, the discussion of character building programs above and in later sections reflected parents' anxieties, ambiguities, and unsettled aspirations around the role of character building in Chinese education. For the parents, they might conceive of the character education in the Western countries as harmonised, straightforward, and comprehensive whereas in China it was viewed as inconsistent, ambiguous, and conflicting. To continue, Dana mentioned another difference between Chinese and Western education,

[the second point is] the average levels of teacher ability are different; the evaluation standard and curriculum are all individualised in Australia and conform with the characteristics of children of different ages. As for teachers, they respect every student and practise according to different children's realities. In China, the curriculum, the textbooks, and the evaluation are all uniform. Plus, teachers all teach uniformly.

(Interview with Dana 13/08/2016)

Dana mentioned the conformity of Chinese education as a prominent feature. For her, Western education tended to be individualised and tailored to personal needs, whereas Chinese education emphasised collectivism and uniformity. Indeed, in China, from the curriculum and textbook design at the macro level to the teachers' pedagogical approach in the micro, conformity was always pursued and encouraged whereas personal characteristics and individualism were traditionally discouraged. Even though during these years *suzhi* educational reform foregrounded individualism and creativity, uniformity and collectivism still prevailed in educators' mind-sets. In fact, both individualism and collectivism were part of the values that the current Chinese *suzhi* education system promoted and encouraged students to acquire. Dana's words just explicated the obvious contradictions in *the suzhi* educational reform. Then she continued,

The third main contrast is that the community [in Australia] is involved much more than in China. In Chinese education, education is an independent system.

Education, families, schools, and society are all separated. Whereas in the school my child attends now, parents get involved quite a bit. There is a parents' committee and parents are invited to participate in a wide variety of different activities. The community also plays a fairly important role in education. Also, different communities interact with each other. For example, there are various leagues and games where children and their families can participate. The league system is usually very well-maintained and children from a very young age begin to cultivate their sporting spirit. In local families, both mothers and fathers attend their children's competitions. What you feel is that from very young, their education involves the whole society. In contrast, in China specialised sport is only trained and practiced in schools; I think that is the advantage of Western education.

(Interview with Dana 13/08/2016)

Here, Dana put forward community involvement, concretised in family participation in sports activities, as another prominent feature of Australian education that China did not have. Dana's emphasis on the role of sports in bringing the family and community together also echoed the WeChat posts on Western education, which were discussed in section 7.2. Sports seemed to be a place where family and community worked together: it played a more significant role in Western education and was seen as a bridge to connect individuals and the community.

Annette Lareau (2011) claimed that participation in concerted cultivation is a typical educational practice for middle-class parents. The parental engagement in sports activities in Australian schools mentioned by Dana was typical concerted cultivation that developed children's overall abilities. By doing so, parents fostered their children's sense of community, team spirit, perseverance, hard work, robustness, cooperation, and independence, which were all important working ethics in a neoliberal society. In some sense, organising children to take part in these activities was part of the process of fulfilling parents' responsibilities to help the children cultivate the dispositions that would bring them benefits. That was direct parent involvement that Dana believed was encouraged in the Australian EYE environment and had the capacity to promote children's development, which fell short in China. It was also a way for families to spend time together, which was also featured in the WeChat posts on American education in section 7.2.

8.1.2 'The miracle can only happen in China!' – Divisive Western education

Not all the experiences with Western education were deemed as superior. For some parents, the exam-oriented education typical of China, which had been targeted for criticism by others in the WeChat group, had its positive aspects. Some parents justified the competitiveness and the meritocratic system, arguing that the pressure and competitiveness were also unavoidable in the Western context as long as one wanted to pursue excellence. In a group conversation when many parents were complaining about how Chinese education was too competitive and lamenting how Western education respected children's freedom and honoured their self-esteem, CiCi expressed her disagreement,

You can try to apply for the famous high schools or universities in the US. It's not easy at all! It's not easy to get into the highly reputed universities in the US and Europe, either. It's basically the same everywhere that high scores lead to good universities. In Germany, the best medical schools also want children whose scores are high.

(From WeChat group conversation, 10 March 2016)

As an active mother in the WeChat group who claimed to have overseas experience, CiCi tried hard to convince others that China's current system should not be abandoned, as Western society practiced a similar education system as well. CiCi had visited the UK during Chinese New Year and had taken her son to experience some taster sessions of British education in an educational exchange program. Despite her attempts to involve her son in Western education, she still decided to base his pre-university education in China. After justifying the competitiveness in Chinese education, saying it was universal, she went on to mention her UK trip in the group,

After my visit to the UK, I began to cherish the Chinese system even more! Take the British education system as an example; I can see that the European education system is divided to suit people of different social class backgrounds. Where is the equality? The aristocrat will always have their aristocratic education, and the poor will have the education for the poor. Maybe the less well-off families in Europe even wish they could change their fate through *zhongkao* [Chinese senior secondary school entrance exams] or *gaokao* [Chinese university entrance exams] like us! I am telling you, the miracle of poor people changing their fate through education can only happen in China!

(From WeChat group conversation, 10 March 2016)

For parents like CiCi, Chinese education seemed to be classless and enjoyed more equality than its counterparts in the West. As discussed in the previous chapters, even though *gaokao* and *zhongkao* were heavily criticised, some parents still believed that they opened the door for social mobility. Indeed, few parents mentioned the idea of social class in their discussion of Western education. CiCi's views on Western education – that it was cementing class divide across the whole of society – will be later presented in the exploration of the posts on UK education.

Though CiCi did not entirely favour Western education, she also criticised the pressure the Chinese education system brought to children: she believed it had to change and children should be given more time to play and relax. In the interview with her, she expressed her distress,

Our children have too much pressure today. They are running to various classes to learn all the things that can prove they are the best. Indeed, they have got too much pressure.

(Interview with CiCi 02/08/2016)

Regardless of what views parents in the WeChat group held about Chinese or Western education, it was generally agreed by parents that Chinese education inflicted too much pressure on children, even though they disagreed on whether Western education could offer the answer. For CiCi, even though she acknowledged the problems of Chinese education, she did not believe that the solutions to the problems lay in Western education.

8.1.3 Incorporating Western education into Chinese soil

Some parents in the group opted to send their children to international schools in China so that they could receive both Chinese and Western education. Jane was a group member in Guangzhou, a mega-city in southeast China. She had recently transferred her daughter from a public school to a private international school in the hope of a better education. She worked as an academic at a famous university in southeast China. Unlike the parents discussed above, she disclosed to me in the interview that she had never worked in the West, nor did she intend to send her child abroad in the near future. However, she sent her child to an international school in her city. She deemed it as a justified choice which would bring her child a lot of educational benefits. In my interview with her, Jane talked about the differences between the private international schools and the traditional public schools,

After years of development, we are now in an endless loop. On the one hand, because *gaokao* is still there, teachers have to teach in certain ways to cater for the needs of *gaokao* because if you cannot get good scores, then your choices are really limited. Sometimes, some schools conduct *suzhi* education reform, trying to be a bit more relaxed. As far as I know, when the schools are seriously trying to reduce the burden on the children, it is the parents who resist the most. They don't like the school to reduce the amount of homework and put *suzhi* education into real practice. However, in the private international primary school that my daughter attends, they believe that morality and character building are more important than exam scores or going to universities. The school has nine grades, and I feel that no matter which grades the children are in, they are all very open, confident, and outgoing. Every Thursday, the school is open to parents. Every child you meet will greet you warmly and say hello to you. And if you ask them any question, they'll give you very clear answers. In traditional schools, when you speak to a boy, he may just shy away.

(From the interview with Jane, 27 August 2016)

Jane had direct experience in both China's public schools and private international schools. She confessed that she felt that *suzhi* education could hardly be conducted in public schools due to *gaokao*. Therefore, Jane decided to take the initiative to provide her child with the best possible educational option out of the existing public education system. This was in line with parents who viewed the Chinese public education as conflicting and ambiguous as discussed in section 8.1.1. Because of that, education programs which had a Western element became some of the parents' choices in the group to counter what they deemed as disadvantages of Chinese education.

Jane's child was still too young to live an independent life in a foreign country, while she could not leave her job and work abroad. As a result, she turned to a local international school that offered a Western education program. She also found children in the international program to be more confident and she attributed it to the fact that Western education valued character education more. Jane disclosed to me in the interview that parents like her who chose to send their children to the international schools had usually decided not to return to the Chinese educational path which was characterised by the various exams in the Chinese education system. It was either approach A or B, and once parents had made the decision, they had to be responsible for their choice. Therefore, for Jane, once her child was old enough, she might still send him to the West for education.

Receiving Western education on Chinese soil was thus a compromise for the family to prepare for the child's future.

These parents who made such a choice to send their children to an international school in China were usually based in big cities where many Western expats lived. For example, in the WeChat group conversations, parents who mentioned to have sent or intend to send their children in International schools included CiCi in Shanghai, Jenny in Beijing and Jane in Guangzhou. The internationalisation in these cities had led to the establishment of various international schools. In recent years, more and more of these international schools had changed their 'international student only' policy to embrace China's domestic market.

8.1.4 Producing Western education in China

For most parents in the group, however, their discussions of Western education were mostly based on their indirect experience and secondary information from various media sources or limited exposure to Western education. These parents also developed their own perspectives of Western education in their daily life in the Chinese education context. Discussion of Western education constituted an important topic in the WeChat group. It was a common practice in the group to refer to a Western country to compare or contrast the educational practice in China. Parents in the group, regardless of whether or not they had been exposed to Western education offline, had developed some understanding or opinions of Western education. Luli, who was residing in a small county in east China and had never been abroad, commented on education during the interview,

I think that Western education doesn't emphasis test scores as much as we do. Instead, they highly value kids' overall abilities. They won't judge whether a child is good or bad by how they perform in tests. If children do well in fields other than academics, that is fine in Western education. But I don't agree with some people who say that people in the West do not value education as much as the Chinese. If that's the case, how come students in Harvard would study until four or five o'clock in the morning? But Chinese education only values students' basic knowledge, so when they are in universities, they have no potential.'

(from the interview with Luli 6 August 2016)

Parents like Luli, who had little direct Western educational exposure, were representative of the parents in the WeChat group. The lack of direct access and experience to Western education did not prevent them from learning from the West and expressing their views towards Western education. For her, education in the West did not judge children by test

scores. Furthermore, she tried to refute some people's impressions that people in Western countries did not value education. She used a widely disseminated post, which described how the library of Harvard University was still packed with students at 5 o'clock in the morning, to justify her claim, as if she had been to the Harvard library herself.

In a group conversation, Bi, a mother whose son was five years old and studied in a local preschool in southeast China, also commented on Western education,

I think the difference between Western and Chinese education is that Western education honours children's nature, but Chinese education only emphasises learning knowledge. For Western kids, many things they have learnt have nothing to do with the textbooks. It is about knowing the real world. For example, Western education encourages children to paint the world around them in their own way. Also, it encourages children to keep a diary, not in words but in pictures. I like this way. Children are more confident and bolder. I like children to grow up in this way, until the 3rd grade. In the primary grades in China, children are being mowed by the lawn mower and all become the same.

(from the WeChat group conversation 15 August 2016)

Bi made the metaphor that students in China were mowed flat by education machines while Western education encouraged students' individuality and creativity. Parents like Bi talked about Western education as familiarly and naturally as those who were directly involved. Their perceptions of Western education came from many different sources. Bi had never lived in the West, nor had Luli studied at Harvard. However, Luli commented that students in Harvard studied as late as five o'clock in the morning and Bi said that education in the West honoured people's individuality. It was difficult and not the intention of the thesis to verify the truthfulness of their statements, nor would it be easy to trace from which source they formed their views. However, both parents seemed to have developed their own knowledge of Western education and were able to articulate its strengths, upon which they could also criticise Chinese education.

The WeChat group also provided a critical lens to understand how parents' views of Western education had been generated. One of the most important sources that influenced parents' perceptions was social media like WeChat, where parents could learn from others by discussing with other WeChat users and reading posts. This will be analysed in 8.2 section of the chapter.

To summarise, parents in the WeChat group had at least four kinds of different relationships with Western education. For some parents like Fang and Dana, their children were being educated in Western countries and they had direct experience of dealing with Western education. They normally held a favourable view towards Western education, which was evident by their decision to move their children to the West for study. Other parents like CiCi were not entirely favourable towards Western education and believed that Chinese education provided equal opportunities compared to that in the West. There were also parents like Jane who educated her child in China but incorporated a Western approach in an international school. Parents like her might give up their children's educational path in Chinese education and send their children to the West in the future. For other parents like Luli and Bi, they had limited direct experience with Western education, but still formed their own views on it. These parents' attitudes towards Western education varied but were generally positive. What parents held positive about Western education included freedom, respect for interest, flexibility, hands-on experience, community involvement, and character building. These 'advantages' were regarded by them as something that Chinese education lacked.

In this WeChat group, Chinese parents turned to the West to learn about their experiences as some of them were dissatisfied with the current EYE their children received in China. They were learning from the West to improve their children's competitiveness and overcome what they held as disadvantages of the Chinese education system. They took initiatives to actively shape their children's educational experiences and outcomes with reference to Western education, based on their own experiences, knowledge, and disposable resources. For example, parents like Fang and Dana took their children abroad to have the first-hand and 'authentic' Western education. Other parents like CiCi and Jane provided their children with some Western-education inspired instruction and education programs, but would mainly remain in China. Parents like Luli and Bi, though they had barely any direct experience with Western education, also actively pursued information from the media and were competent at articulating their views. What these parents had in common was that they actively gathered information on Western education, took the initiative to supplement, or in some cases, replace the EYE they received in China and made their own

pedagogic judgement to give their children what they believed to be the best education. Turning to the West in this sense became an essential way for these parents to fulfil their responsibility to provide the most appropriate education to their children.

For many parents in the WeChat group, learning from the West also entailed a sense of moral obligation, as the advantages of Western education would potentially boost their children's prospects and would help fulfil their responsibilities as parents. In other words, they held themselves responsible for the pedagogic choices concerning their children's education and future. In the WeChat group, they were gathering information and sharing their concerns with each other so that they could make informed choices. In the meantime, parents were ready to bear the consequences and risks, as choosing the Western education path and its values often collided with the indigenous educational values and the Chinese education path. It was sometimes an either-or option requiring parents to carefully plan and calculate the pros and cons of their choice.

Many of the parents' educational pursuits were also reflected in the posts circulated in the group. Analysis of the posts can open a window to understanding the parents' views and aspirations. Reading the WeChat posts is also one of the major ways where Chinese parents got to know about Western education. In the following section, the posts on Western education will be presented and analysed.

8.2 Posts on Western education in WeChat

Apart from group conversations and interviews, another important source of information that made frequent reference to Western education in the WeChat group are the posts. Many of the posts parents brought in and shared among each other featured education in countries like the US, UK, Australia, and Canada. Among them, the US and UK were particularly popular and were also the most frequently referred to. These posts were typical WeChat articles that were designed to cater to its readers and could be shared and circulated within the WeChat app. There were parent volunteers who would frequently put forward articles in the authorship of the Little MBA group. They were usually drafted to catch the reader's eye, with catchy titles and many pictures inserted, so that they could be shared by readers and attain maximum circulation. This constituted an important source of

information in WeChat. These posts were shared in the WeChat group and were accessible to all group members. Analysis of these posts on Western education provided valuable insights into how parents received them, and how the way they were used reflected parents' views and perceptions of EYE.

Throughout the analysis, I find that the education in the US and the UK was presented as having different features. The features reflected not only some aspects of education in either the US or the UK but also parents' own concerns of their children's education. Below, I will briefly summarise what features of the UK and US education these posts have displayed. During the process, I selected and presented a few posts that were most representative and investigate how they reflected parents' views and aspirations of Chinese education.

There seemed to be three aspects that were prominent in the posts on American education.

- a. **Entrepreneurship and its associated neoliberal values.** The most evident feature of American education in the WeChat posts was the entrepreneurship and its associated neoliberal values. American education in these posts was presented as the one focusing on cultivating children's creativity. For example, two posts (*How Were the Authors' Children Admitted into Elite American Educational Institutions* forwarded by Dudu on 12th February, 2016, and *Do Famous American Schools Have a Place For Chinese Children?* forwarded by Bi on 9th March, 2016) explicitly highlighted the fact that entrepreneurship was explicitly encouraged by American education. In *How Were the Authors' Children Admitted Into Elite American Educational Institutions*, it highlighted the fact that entrepreneurship was explicitly encouraged by American education. It said, 'American preschools do not care so much about "1+1=?". Instead, children spend their day playing. Educators also spare no efforts in cultivating children's entrepreneurship, curiosity, imagination, explorative spirit, independence, teamwork and sociability...Children are born with creativity. If we provide them with abundant opportunities, if we do not limit their imagination, they can express themselves the way they want. They may create a painting, a story or even a business...We should also foster children's ability of handling money. In American, children learn to make money from young by doing family chores. Some children formed small business from young'.

Other posts also lauded the cultivation of other characteristics associated with entrepreneurship. This included autonomy, character building (*Children Need to Take Character Tests Before Going Abroad!* forwarded by Dudu on 9th January 2016) and the ability to speak up for oneself (*The American Time of My Daughter and Me* forwarded by Jenny on 25th December 2015). This was in line with Bi's comments in the interview that American parents encouraged their children to be bold while Chinese children were instructed to be obedient.

- b. **Learning methods.** Many of the posts on US education highlighted that American education was good at fostering learning methods. These methods included RACE (*The Most Efficient Way to Teach Children to Write Reading Reviews* forwarded by Jenny on 27th February 2016) and SMART (*With A New Year's Resolution, You Are More Likely to Achieve Your Goal* forwarded by Dudu on 1st January 2016). Both RACE and SMART were the abbreviations of different words that represented the advocated methods that were claimed to be practiced in the US. RACE meant Restate, Answer, Cite, and Explain. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-based. These posts suggested that parents in this group were eager to learn the specific methods American educators adopted in order to improve children's performance and seemed to regard the US as a source for better learning and teaching methods. Parents' adoption of these methods was also a way to fulfil their responsibilities of parenting and education.
- c. **Quality family times.** Many of the posts lauded how parents in the US were closely involved in their children's education process. They would spend time together with their children (*Obama Can Finally Be a Good Father* forwarded by PanPan on 30th December 2015), participate in shared reading (*How were the authors' children admitted into elite American educational institutions?*), volunteer in school activities (*The American parents' committee election also 'pin die' but in a different way* forwarded by Niu on 9th March 2016). The acclaim of the involvement and investment of American parents reflected parents' self-responsibilisation in their children's education in the WeChat group. Parents emphasised family time because

it was regarded as a quality time which benefited both the children and the parent. It was also reflected in Fena's choice in section 5.3.1 who did not choose to pick up piano because it might erode the family routines of outings. These posts also share a feature that fathers were actively involved in the family time. In some sense, it reflected the call for Chinese fathers, especially among the more traditional families, to take more responsibility in parenting. For example, in the interview with Bi, she complained that her husband - the father of her two children - had seldom got involved in the education process. Therefore, by talking about how the entire family in the US was involved in the education process, parents were re-confirming or advocating the view that both parents should take part in educating a child.

These posts on American education were all collected in the WeChat group over the data collection period. They presented various aspects of American education that were circulated among the parents. What interested me the most was not whether American education had been faithfully represented; instead, my concern related to which images of American education were valued by parents, and why.

Alongside the US, British education was also frequently featured in the WeChat posts. In the following table, the posts on British education are presented. Again, I did not attempt to exhaust all the posts on British education but aimed to demonstrate which aspects of British education were valued by the Chinese parents in the group, and how this could reveal parents' educational aspirations of their children's EYE in China.

For the posts on British education, they were presented in many ways differently from the posts on US education. There are several apparent features as follows,

- a. **Character building.** In the posts, British education put high value on character building. For example, posts mentioned the various personalities and characters that were valued in British education including resilience and independence (*A Real 'Noble' Child Should Be Cultivated In This Way: The Reflections Of a Mom on Sending Her Child To a Top British Private School* forwarded by Dudu on 29th December 2015), leadership (*The Principles Of Leadership Development In British Private Schools* forwarded by PanPan on 14th January 2016), respect and manners (*The*

British Aristocratic Education Booklet: Guidelines On The New Type of 'Fuyang' forwarded by Wuli on 8th March 2016). Also, specific established programs, like the Duke of Edinburgh Award, were also named many times as examples of the character building programs in British education system (*The Principals Of Leadership Development In British Private Schools; The British Aristocratic Education Booklet: Guidelines On The New Type of 'Fuyang'*). This was also confirmed in the WeChat group conversations. Jane sent her son to an International school the semester before the interview. She found that the new school spent much more efforts on cultivating manners and building up children's confidence than the traditional schools did. Even though Meng had never gone abroad, she also disclosed in the interview that her view of Western education was that 'they laid more emphasis on character building while in China, the main focus was on getting a higher mark in exams'.

- b. **Aristocratic education and private schooling.** The idea of equating British education with aristocratic education was mentioned in many of the posts on British education in the group. They showed how British education was constructed in this group and how it had been 'aristocraticised' by these parents. Very often, the British education featured in the posts was related to nobility, social status, and a strong sense of character building. In this set of posts, aristocratic education was not necessarily equated with education for the wealthy, but referred to as education with a strong emphasis on character cultivation, which would help retain the social status. For example, in *The Preschool That British Prince George Attends Values This the Most* (forwarded by Cici on 3rd March 2016), by analysing the educational values of Thomas's Battersea Preschool, the one Prince George attended, the post claimed that British aristocratic education emphasised the cultivation of pupils' emotional quotient (EQ) more than academic performance. From a young age, children learnt to deal with others, including people of different social classes, races, and values. It also mentioned the principles of Eton College, another prestigious educational institution saying that the British aristocratic education paid attention not only to academic learning, but more importantly, the acceptance of other people and respect for their differences. It

further claimed that the typical British gentleman cultivated by Eton was not only willing to help others but was equipped with the abilities to solve problems.

Chinese parents in the group seemed particularly fond of the idea of the ‘aristocraticisation’ of education. Many of the parents in the WeChat group hoped that education could help their families accumulate and retain socioeconomic resources and move upward in society. It is evident in Chapter 6 when parents invest money and time in children’s *ke wai ban* development. As the UK was an established country with a long tradition of linking private schooling with high-quality education and social status, the parents in the group wanted to ensure the smooth transfer of their socioeconomic status to their children by providing them with high-quality education, as well-off British parents did. This seemed to be in line with many of the parents’ practice in the WeChat. CiCi sent her son to an exchange program to the UK with the purpose to cultivate a gentleman. Fang registered her son to various *ke wai ban* that were all costly but were also typical practice for British upper middle class families.

- c. ***Fuyang*** and ***qiongyang***. Chinese educational ideas, like *fuyang* (cultivation with abundance) and *qiongyang* (cultivation with deprivation), were borrowed to understand the British education system. In *The British Aristocratic Education Booklet: Guidelines On The New Type of ‘Fuyang’*, the author talked about his experience of attending a birthday party of his son’s friend named Thomson. Even though Thomson was in a well-off family, the author found that the family did not show off with buying branded products but impressed others with attention to detail and taking good care of the guests. The author said, ‘in the *fuyang* idea, children was not made by gold. It is about aesthetics, creativity, manner, health and self-discipline. It is a combination of a bit of the wilderness and delicateness. So children are a bit adventurous in the meanwhile know the boundary’. He spoke highly of how rich parents in the UK educated their children with the abundant resources they had. Other posts demonstrated that British parents would not only provide the material resources for their children, as done by Chinese parents, but would enhance children’s character by exposing them to hardships to make them strong, including registering them on the

Duke of Edinburgh program (*The Preschool That British Prince George Attends Values This The Most; A Real 'Noble' Child Should Be Cultivated In This Way*). This exposure to hardship was tagged as '*qiongyang*' (cultivation with deprivation). In *The Preschool That British Prince George Attends Values This the Most*, it claimed that in British aristocratic education, *fuyang* and *qiongyang*, the two opposing approaches could sit comfortably with each other, where parents adopted *fuyang* to cultivate their children's fertile minds and versatility, and *qiongyang* to build up a physical body and strong will. In *The Preschool That British Prince George Attends Values This The Most*, the author held the view that private schools in the UK were accessible not only to the aristocratic class as they were in the 18th to early 20th century but were increasingly accessible to middle-class professionals. It said that British education valued independence, exemplified by the fact that children had to carry their own school bags and deal with many other issues that would otherwise have been handled by parents in China. The post also emphasised sports in private schooling. It mentioned how horse riding, skiing, and other outdoor activities were encouraged in the private schools, that the author's child attended in order to strengthen her will and help her to grow and develop. The author related this to Confucian teachings. She used a famous Chinese verse to summarise her points: 'the road to the success of a man was so hard that he would be made exhausted and starving' (Chinese original goes as 天将降大人于斯人也，必先劳其筋骨，饿其体肤).

The idea that British education is combined with *fuyang* and *qiongyang* seemed to balance the previous aspects of aristocratic and private schooling. It used Chinese notions to downplay the connection between wealth and the extravagant way of parenting. Rather, it presented how the well-off families in UK would purposely sharpen children's character by exposing them to hardships. Using *qiongyang* and *fuyang*, two Chinese notions to discuss British education not only made it easy for the Chinese parents to understand the parenting approach and connect with their own experiences, it also made parents to reflect on their own parenting practice when many of them have accumulated some wealth but could not properly use the capital to enhance their children's education.

Apart from the UK and the US, other Western societies were sporadically mentioned in the WeChat group posts, such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. In addition, a few industrialised Asian countries appeared in the WeChat group as well, like Japan and Singapore. For example, there were posts named, *'Foreign countries value more the development of interest: my friend's sharing about Australian libraries and bookshops'*, *'The three-year-olds going shopping and the seven-year-olds taking the subway...How to cultivate super independent Japanese children'*. However, compared with the US and UK, these countries appeared less and carried less weight.

I do not intend to suggest that these posts in the WeChat group were telling absolute truths about education in the respective countries, as it was difficult to verify the claims they made. Compared with academic writing, these posts followed few academic standards and did not display rigid reasoning and evidence. However, as an important resource of information in WeChat, they did have a significant readership and exerted a large influence on parents' views and practices. Furthermore, the posts reflected the aspects of Western education that the parents aspired to learn about and how they positioned themselves in their children's education.

Different emphases were placed between the posts dedicated to these two countries' education systems. American education was pragmatically linked with particular learning methods like RACE or SMART, while British education was more linked to character building. Also, in the posts American education seemed to be presented as more liberal. Children there were encouraged to embrace neoliberal values and encouraged to become more innovative and entrepreneurial. British education was presented in the posts as more traditional and was associated with self-cultivation and cultivation of manners. Furthermore, parents tended to regard private schools, especially famous ones in England such as Eton and Harrow, as representative of British education.

Accordingly, the posts also suggested that there were differentiated benefits Chinese parents could gain from US and UK education. Parents believed that children could benefit most from British education in regard to manners, character building, self-control, arts, and

history. In the posts, British education was seen as emphasising traditions, history, and humanity. On the other hand, American education in the posts was presented as innovative, entrepreneurial, creative, fun, and pragmatic. In the American system, specific and standardised learning methods and approaches were frequently introduced.

There were also notable similarities between posts on both countries. It was found that both the US and UK posts frequently referred to higher education, even though these posts were supposedly written for parents whose children mainly belonged to the EYE stage. Particularly in posts on the US, top American universities like Harvard were often mentioned. Indeed, these top universities became a mirror reflecting parents' insights, aspirations, and hopes for their children's EYE. This resonated with parents' projection towards *gaokao*, the Chinese university entrance exams, discussed in Chapter 8. Sending their children to a famous university was a great mission for parents to accomplish. The American universities, which occupied the largest share of the global top universities rankings, also became part of the parents' ambitions. For the parents, they embodied advanced education provisions that could help their children triumph in the global competition. Therefore, these posts in some way became guidelines for the parents to achieve educational excellence.

Interestingly, posts on both the US and UK used Chinese concepts to make sense of Western education. For example, *fuyang* and *qiongyang*, two dichotomous Chinese parenting styles meaning education with abundance and education with restraint, were used in posts to explain how British parents in elite private schools were investing in their children's education while cultivating their children's strong will. Understandably, the use of Chinese concepts in a Western context did not always entirely match their meanings in the Chinese language. However, it was a useful way for the Chinese parents in the group to make sense of Western education and relate it with their own experience. In addition, parents used Confucian teachings to justify some of the educational practices in the Western context. For example, a famous Chinese verse by Mencius, the second most notable Confucian scholar after Confucius, was used to explain the benefits of experiencing the hardship of the Duke of Edinburgh Award program. In some sense, the authors, as well as the parent recipients in the WeChat group, did not mechanically copy Western education; instead, they

comprehended and reproduced Western education within their Chinese cultural backgrounds and re-assigned Western education new meanings in the Chinese context. As with the idea of *fuyang*, by linking it with the British way of education, parents were compelled to think about how to invest their resources in their children's education wisely. By familiarising these parents with the British aristocratic class, these posts satisfied the Chinese parents who learnt how education could be adequately invested and used to improve their social positions, just as the British nobility passes on wealth and status from one generation to the next.

I was fully aware that these posts could not represent the entire US, UK, and other education systems in Western countries. Many aspects of Western education were not presented. There also seemed to be an invisible mechanism in WeChat group to filter and select the aspects of the Western education. For example, the public sector of British education was barely mentioned. The posts about UK education predominantly focused on private and elite education, which created the impression that private education equalled education in general in the UK, which was biased and simplistic. It seemed that parents in this group did not know, or might not be interested to know, about the differences between the British public and private education systems. They seemed to be interested in an education that was consistent with their own socioeconomic status and aspirations in China and a system that could help them retain their social status.

A similar filtering system was in place for the posts on American education as well. In the US, race and class issues were seldom mentioned within the WeChat group. It was the elements that influenced quality (rather than equality), like fostering students' creativity and entrepreneurship, that attracted the parents' attention the most. The filtering mechanisms concerning both US and UK education were like a self-censorship system which was endorsed by those who authored, read, and circulated the posts in the group. Those posts were, to some extent, used in the WeChat group not only as an introduction to Western education but also as a way to campaign on parents' own values, attitudes, and agendas.

Furthermore, from the tables above, it is evident that both neoliberal values and traditional values were promoted in the WeChat posts. These neoliberal values included exhibiting self-responsibility, independence, cooperativeness, entrepreneurship, confidence, self-management skills, resilience, and flexibility; the traditional values included elegance, manners, courtesy, discipline, rules, and order. These two sets of values, though sometimes conflicting with each other, were harmonised in the posts and parents' discussion about the various forms of 'Western education' in the WeChat group.

The ambiguity and discontinuity of the two sets of values were in line with the conflicts in the idea of *suzhi*, as discussed in the previous chapters. *Suzhi* was a contentious notion advocated for by the Chinese government to promote the qualities and values children should be equipped with for the contemporary world. *Suzhi* education was promoted to take the place of exam-oriented education in China and was used to enhance children's all-round development. Western education was an important source of inspiration for *suzhi* education and the conversations around Western education in the WeChat group had become an alternative way for these parents to promote their own agenda of *suzhi* education.

It is also worth noting that the different sets of information-the posts, the group conversations and the interviews-could supplement with each other in presenting a whole picture of Western education. The posts on Western education provided important source of topics in the groups; the group conversations motivated people to share posts to summarise and supplement certain themes or open new directions. The interviews allowed me to go deep into their opinions of Western education. Altogether, it gave me the chance to have a complete picture of how parents construct Western education and how it was related to parents' understanding of their own education practice.

Above, I presented parents' constructions of Western education by displaying their own views alongside an analysis of the WeChat posts. In the following part of the thesis, I will focus on the interrogation of the aspirations behind the various views and perspectives parents held towards Western education.

8.3 Why does Western education matter to the parents?

At the beginning of this chapter, I presented CiCi's criticism of how education in the UK was impeding the mobility between classes. Her fiercely written words, however, did not get much attention in the WeChat group. The table on British education above clearly demonstrates how the parents in the group had equated the private, or 'aristocratic', education with British education as a whole. What did the 'aristocratic education' mean to their children? Why did parents in the group use the various forms of Western education as their desired model to learn from? Furthermore, if the Western education presented in the group was incompletely represented, what was the implication?

I argue that parents' learning of the West was their active and agentic response towards their parenting and education responsibility to their children. The parents' participation and involvement in the exploration, acquisition, and comprehension of Western education was part of their efforts to take on and enact their responsibilities in their role as parents in contemporary Chinese society. They actively made choices involving Western education to ensure that their children could succeed despite China's uncertain prospects within global competition. Individual parents in the WeChat group also came to identify with the national objectives – like entrepreneurship, creativity, and independence – embodied in *suzhi* education, by learning, discussing, producing, and distributing Western education. These parents tried to promote the values they strived for their children to acquire, and manage the conflicts among the different educational pursuits simultaneously embodied in China's *suzhi* education campaign. In this way, parents in the WeChat group were exercising their agentic role in the parenting and education process. This process revealed parents' responsibilisation (Doherty & Dooley, 2018; Done & Murphy, 2018; Foucault, 1979; Peter, 2005) for their children's education.

When we turn to the Western context, it is evident that under neoliberal policies, the responsibility of parenting and educating has been increasingly transferred from the state to individual families. Parents, therefore, have been held responsible for weaving a safety net for their children's future (Milkie & Warner, 2014; Doherty & Dooley, 2018). The notion of responsibilisation was accordingly coined to conceptualise the process. In the research of

Doherty & Dooley (2018) on Australian shadow education, they borrowed the definition of responsabilisation from Peter (2005), which defined this notion as

self-government that requires individuals to make choices... 'choice' assumes a much wider role under neoliberalism: it is not simply 'consumer sovereignty' but a moralisation and responsabilisation, a regulated transfer of choice-making responsibility from the state to the individual in the social market. (p. 130)

Based on Peter's notion (2005), Doherty & Dooley (2018) further analysed the key features of responsabilisation. They claimed that the notion entailed a moral agency and the potential to take action, and that it also required reflexivity. In addition, people who made choices were supposed to bear the consequences of these choices. These features of responsabilisation were all prominent in explaining parents' learning of Western education in the WeChat group. The establishment of the WeChat parent group itself was clearly a way for parents to shoulder the responsibility transferred from the state to the individual family. The group provided a space where parents could collectively discuss, reflect, and potentially enact their responsibilities. Parents in this group invested intensively and sustainably to guarantee a 'safety net' (Milkie & Warner, 2014) and strive to produce insurance strategies for their children's lives (Doherty & Dooley, 2018). The group's turning to Western education was, to a large extent, a way for these Chinese parents to manage their anxieties towards their children's uncertain futures and risks. Many of the advantages of Western education claimed by the parents, like entrepreneurship, creativity, and character building, which were also constituents of *suzhi*, were held by the parents as the key to success in their children's future. The current Chinese state education system had failed to uphold them, so it was the parents' own responsibility and obligation to come up with ways to foster them. Engaging in Western education and using Western education to inspire their own parenting strategies had therefore become the approach these parents adopted. It does not matter whether or not Western education had been faithfully represented in the WeChat group. What the parents hoped to achieve was to promote their own values and aspirations, in the name of a different Western education, to ensure their children's future success. The responsabilised parents engaged, produced, and distributed Western education as a tool to weave a safety net for their children and relieve their educational anxieties.

As parents in the WeChat group demonstrated, they were concerned that the education their children received from the state was no longer sufficient in the global capitalist system. As Bi commented in the interview, the knowledge delivered at school could become 'useless' once children left school. However, she felt that the cultivation of learning dispositions and characteristics could sustain and exert even greater influence. The recent education reform in China aimed to promote children's *suzhi* and cultivate their entrepreneurship and creativity, in the meantime producing disciplined and patriotic children loyal to the Party. However, as presented in the previous chapters, many argued that the education reform largely failed to achieve its goals due to unresolved conflicts within the reform. Therefore, parents who were worried about their children's education had to undertake and fulfil the responsibility by themselves (Ball, 2010).

To some extent, as the efforts of the state education reform largely failed to achieve its goals, individual parents who opted for an education that was more individualised and creative with less rote learning were held responsible themselves for the achievement of the educational ideals. If the state education could not properly support and cultivate children to become creative, inventive, and entrepreneurial citizens, parents were then obliged to make pedagogic choices to take on the responsibility of the cultivation of their own children. Parents were 'expected to adopt a highly reflexive, intentional and carefully researched orientation to the consumer market' (Sophia Alice, 2014, p. 331).

This seemed to be evident in their avidly discussing, spreading and supporting of Western education. The WeChat group members were reflective of the tensions between the state, individual parents, and global capitalistic power. China's political, economic, and educational systems were increasingly subject to the influence of the West. The value system, knowledge, and dispositions delivered by the state education did not necessarily fit children's future lives brought by the country's changing position in the world. Therefore, many parents in the Little MBA WeChat group suffered from anxiety due to the uncertainty and conflicts faced by their children in education.

This anxiety compelled parents to turn to social media. Parents openly discussed their concerns about their children's education and heavily referred to Western education as

their proposed solution to the problem, which was presented in the tables above.

Participation in the WeChat group was an important way for the parents to learn how to be parents in contemporary China, through which they were positioning themselves as subjects in need of learning in order to carry out their roles as parents (Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014). However, WeChat and the parent group were by no means a form of anxiety relief, as some parents held the view that social media was more about exaggerating and spreading anxiety. In my research, it was also apparent that as a platform, WeChat allowed parents' anxiety to be discussed and exposed, where expectations and approaches to practice 'good parenting' were (re)produced.

Returning to the previous chapters, parents in the WeChat group took part in the *ke wai ban* practice to supplement the mainstream education their children received from the official education institutions. The various *ke wai ban* options disclosed parents' views and aspirations for their children's early years education. These *ke wai ban* services, to various degrees, also embodied parents' reactions to the transference of educational responsibility from the state to the individual. I also described how parents had projected and prepared *gaokao*, the national college entrance exams, when their children were still in the early years stage of education. The early preparation of *gaokao* had caused concerns about the problems brought by the high-stake exam-centred education system. In this chapter, by presenting parents' engagement with Western education, I aimed to demonstrate how parents had responsibilised themselves, using Western education to react and respond to the problems within the current Chinese education system.

Parents in China were required to become pedagogic parents (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014). They had to learn to self-regulate themselves and make informed judgements and choices according to what they believed was the best educational practice for their children. Parents taking up pedagogic roles were also exercising their freedom under the market economy (Peters, 2017). This freedom in some sense was closely related to the marketisation of Chinese education and its economy in general.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter discussed parents' learning from Western education. I discussed the different constructions of education in the WeChat group. Also, by combining parents' conversations, interviews and posts, I presented and analysed the how UK and US education were constructed in the WeChat group. These days, while economically well-off parents in China, like many in the WeChat group, could afford to choose an educational path that was different from mainstream education, they also had to be ready to bear its consequences. They had to be able to reconcile Chinese traditional values with the imported Western values to prepare their children for China's new era as an influential global power. On the one hand, parents in the WeChat group were more proactive, assertive, and confident in exercising their autonomy in education; on the other hand, they had to be prudent and try to minimise risk. They needed to balance and play with the conflicting ideas in *suzhi* education. These all constituted reasons for them to turn to the WeChat group to learn from Western education and seek information, mutual support, and comfort among other parents.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

This study focused on three research questions:

1. What are parents' views about current EYE practice in China?
2. What do parents' views reveal about their aspirations for EYE?
3. What are their understandings of the role of parenting in EYE?

By addressing these questions, I have explored the changing landscape of Chinese parents' views and aspirations of EYE and how they see their roles in it. Parents formed their own community and practiced their parenting in a 21st century way in WeChat. There were still hopes and love, as well as anxieties and concerns, that my parents experienced 20 years ago. At the same time, there were significant differences. So what has my research told us about this group of Chinese parents on WeChat? How has it contributed to knowledge about studying Chinese parents?

In the preceding chapters of the thesis, I showcased these parents' online engagement with their children's EYE. While WeChat as a platform had its limitations, it provided a unique lens through which to explore parents' concerns, aspirations, and views towards their children's education. It also opened a window to study parents' understanding of their roles in EYE. Even though this chapter is designed to function as a 'conclusion', I want to make sure that it is as explorative as summative. The aim of my thesis is not only to complete one enquiry but also to point out new directions, ask new questions, and embark upon new journeys. Therefore, in this chapter, I will state the contributions of the research and make reflections on future research directions. I will first summarise the main claims made in the previous chapters and explain how the different chapters have collectively answered the research questions. Then I will move to state the contributions of the research. I will also examine the implications and limitations of the study.

9.1 A brief summary of the chapters

As a member of the WeChat parent group, I was intrigued by how this group of parents made sense of their experiences in educating and parenting their children. I was also eager to find out how they positioned themselves in their children's education process.

Accordingly, three research questions were formulated (see section 9.1). In order to find out the answers and fully tap the potential and affordances of WeChat, I decided to ethnographically inhabit the Little MBA parent group, follow the parents' conversations, engage with their discussion, and understand their concerns. The information in the group, mainly conversations and textual posts, was collected and analysed as research data, under strict data protection and ethical concerns around the parents' rights and welfare. I also used WeChat's audio call function to conduct audio interviews with a group of eight interviewees to follow up and complement the observation done in the WeChat group, and to further pursue the answers to the research questions. With the help of the various functions of WeChat, I analysed parents' conversations and posts. I then used the original conversations in the parent group, vignettes, and selected literature to present, discuss, and interpret the themes and data. The detailed process is covered in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 on methodological discussion and specific methods.

Before dealing with the methodology, in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 respectively I provided the contextual and academic backgrounds of the research to help readers better understand and locate the study. In Chapter 2, I detailed the policy, institutional, and cultural contexts to which readers can refer for the background information. In Chapter 3, I reviewed the literature to situate the current research in the academic landscape. I also introduced some key academic works, including Vanessa Fong (2004b)'s study on China's first generation of single children, Teresa Kuan (2015)'s research on the tensions and conflicts of Chinese parenting ideals, and Andrew Kipnis (2011a)'s research on Chinese educational desire. They provided the conceptual tools that I could draw upon to interpret and make sense of the data.

Chapter 6 illustrated the lived experience of these parents' encounters of ke wai ban, a form of the prevalent out-of-school educational exercises with which parents and their children engaged. The chapter summarised the various types of ke wai ban in the WeChat group and investigated their differentiated forms and purposes. Additionally, it explored parents' motivations and determination to get involved in these services, by discussing the relationship between ke wai ban and official schooling. Parents were caught between the need to give their children free time to play, and a competitive reality where children needed extra tuition in order to stand out in China's fierce educational competition. Those unresolved tensions ostensibly arose from parents' encounters with ke wai ban, which also effectively interacted with the in-school education. Under the current Chinese education landscape, it was ke wai ban where parents were able to exert the most influence on their children's educational performance. All of the parents' ke wai ban efforts were directly targeted towards performance inside the official educational institutions. Parents in the group were clear about the link between their children's ke wai ban learning and their school performance. It was a form of the parents' active involvement to enhance their children's educational opportunities and cultivate their children's educational achievement, although parents' socioeconomic backgrounds made a difference. These experiences and views were compared and contrasted with concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth, two distinctive education and parenting approaches put forward by Lareau (2011).

In Chapter 7, I presented how parents had prepared for their children's EYE as part of the educational project. I described how parents had to consider gaokao and start academic training from toddlerhood, and how the process had produced hopes, anxieties, and competition for both parents and children. The academic pressure parents had to harbour was embodied in a series of exams children had to take throughout their educational career. These exams were so powerful that they could determine children's future socioeconomic resources and family positions. Thus, parents in the group had been responsabilising themselves and fulfilling their roles in their children's education. This chapter offered a glimpse into how parents were positioned to undertake an educational project that both addressed their educational anxiety and at the same time further cultivated their educational desire. It also investigated parents' responsabilisation in their children's

education and how it had produced parents' confusion, worries, and anxieties. The notion of *suzhi* (Kipnis, 2006, 2011a, 2011b; D. Lin, 2017) was analysed and linked with parents' decreasing sense of security for their children's educational performance. This chapter described how some parents tried to fight back against the exam regime of their young children's education by setting an age before which children could enjoy some relative freedom. However, this practice was challenged by other parents whose children were affected by academic pressure. Chinese parents in this group developed their logic to address the split between the neoliberal educational values and the traditional focus on academic learning: in order to cultivate certain neoliberal qualities like self-confidence, parents had to help their children attain good academic performance. They saw preparation of children's academic performance facilitated, rather than hindered, children's neoliberal development.

In order to address the anxiety faced in their encounters with EYE, these parents turned to Western education for prescriptions. Chapter 8 dealt with how Western education had been perceived and used by these parents. The Western education these parents turned to was more a product manufactured by parents themselves to verify and reinforce their own educational ideology, rather than an objective reality. The version of Western education in the WeChat group was by no means a complete picture but a form of the parents' projected version of education that had been tied up with their aspirations and hopes towards their children's education. The chapter described the parents' various constructions of Western education in the WeChat group and which of their aspirations were reflected in these constructions. I also interrogated how turning to Western education constituted parents' responsibilisation towards their children's education. WeChat played a vital role in creating, spreading, and discussing the image of Western education. As I had argued in Chapter 7, even though parents aimed to relieve their pressure via the WeChat parent group, their activities effectively added another layer of stress. Western education would not necessarily free parents from the high-stakes exam systems in China, but rather added another burden for the parents to catch up with their global counterparts in the non-academic educational agenda.

These three chapters together showed how parents in the WeChat group were trying to cultivate their children's talents and abilities through ke wai ban, which was a process of the responsibilisation of education. Parents self-identified with parenting responsibility and had to manage their children's education as a systematic project. They had to prepare for their children's academic learning as early as the prenatal stage. During the process, parents developed stress and anxiety towards education, so they turned to their imagined conceptions of Western education for treatment and relief. Their image of Western education provided a utopia for some parents but also created new problems.

During the exploration of the research questions proposed at the beginning of the thesis, parents' views and aspirations towards their children's EYE were revealed in the detailed descriptions of their engagement in their children's education, both in and out of the official educational institutions. Parents in this group saw the need to supplement the state education with their own endeavours. They joined the Little MBA WeChat group to seek inspiration, advice, and support from other parents. As the name of the group suggests, by having a discussion with and receiving mutual support from like-minded parents, these parents tried to keep a balance between promoting neoliberal ideals like entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation, and their children's academic success.

However, Chapters 6 to 8 suggested that the mechanism influencing the parents' choices and shaping their views and aspirations was the parents' belief in and enactment of their responsibilities. In this WeChat group, parents at times held very different views from one another; they might disagree on which art class to attend, or whether or not to send their children to early learning classes at all. Despite the differences, the parents all believed in their agentive actions and the responsibility for solving their educational problems and realising their educational aspirations would be fulfilled through the power of the educational market. In Chapter 6, parents disagreed on the types of ke wai ban that children should attend but agreed that they were responsible for searching for a proper service at a proper age. An appropriate ke wai ban existed in the educational market and needed to be paid for by parents. In Chapter 7, parents disagreed on which age was the best for children to start structured academic learning but agreed that it was legitimate for parents to take steps to prepare for their children's learning from early on. Their responsibility was fulfilled

by resorting to the educational market. The idea of paying money in the market to realise their educational aspirations and to complement the state education dominated the group. This constituted the mechanism that controlled the parents' thinking and practice in the WeChat group. According to Kipnis (2011b), it was also a major way that parents responsabilised themselves to produce high *suzhi* citizens who were governable, autonomous, entrepreneurial, democratic, and academically competitive.

9.2 Contribution to knowledge

This research has advanced academic discussions on Chinese parents in a number of ways. First, this study found that many Chinese parents in the WeChat group perceived education as a long-term project that required systematic preparation. Parents always projected ahead to the later stage of education even when their children were still in their early years. Parents in this group could even start to prepare and manage the education project as early as before the children were born (see the prenatal education discussion in section 7.3). With increased disposable wealth, parents in this group intensified their educational investment and aspirations (see section 6.2 about the learning of the various arts). They developed a strong sense of responsibility to manage their children's EYE as a project rather than see it as an independent educational stage. The way to cultivate neoliberal values in these children, which was explicitly associated and advocated by the name of the group, was mainly achieved through the fee-paying educational services (see section 6.3.1 and section 6.3.2); in addition, parents' efforts were framed in China's exam apparatus in education (see section 7.2 and section 7.3).

Second, parents' educational aspirations were complex and sometimes contradictory. This might not seem surprising, given the always-conflicting nature of parents' aspirations (see Fong, 2004; Kuan, 2015; Kipnis, 2011a). However, this study went one step further. It found that some parents in China had actively pursued reconciliation of the contradictions by utilising the various sources they had. Parents' consciously employed different strategies to address their contradictory educational aspirations. This could be done by attending the various *ke wai ban* (see Chapter 6), sending children to attend some form of Western education (see Chapter 8), or seeking support among parents in the WeChat group. Parents developed their own logic to make sense of the contradictions in education. They regarded

academic performance as a necessity of the development of the neoliberal personality. Despite the different strategies parents employed to address the conflicts, there was a common thread running throughout. This study found that the most common way for the parents in the WeChat group to address their contradictions was through choice making in the educational market. The educational market in this research satisfied and offered choices for parents with different agendas. Indeed, the market and the choice making mechanism gave these parents chances to take an active role in shaping and realising their educational aspirations. The use of social media like WeChat made the mechanism accessible to more parents. However, the choice making process was by no means straightforward and easy. To some extent, parents at this time were spoiled as well as overwhelmed by the information. They had to navigate a sea of choices and not get lost.

Third, the Chinese education system in this study was presented as competitive, as in previous research (Fong, 2004; Kuan, 2015). However, parents' perspectives towards educational competition, embodied in their pursuits to improve their children's *suzhi*, had increasingly put more weight on the neoliberal values like creativity and entrepreneurship, at least at the early years stage. Parents were aware that the academic-intensive model of education could no longer guarantee a good career for their children in this era. Even though parents still believed in the role of academic study and were deeply influenced by Confucianism, their educational desires had inevitably expanded from the universal aspirations for university education (Kipnis, 2011a) to more neoliberal values (see section 8.2 on Western education). This seemed to reflect the Chinese government's mission to develop into a global innovation powerhouse and deepen its engagement on the global stage in its 'new era'. Therefore, parents at this time had to bear even more pressure with these added aspirations. On the one hand, they had inherited the traditional high expectations of academic performance; on the other hand, they had also developed the aspiration for their children to become more innovative. In this way, children in the future could become more employable and fulfil the nation's assertive ambition. If parents in Kipnis (2011a)'s study in a small town in Shandong had universal desire and aspirations for their children to attend universities or colleges ten years ago, parents today desired more than that. With the challenges and opportunities presented to the parents in this 'new era', these parents expected their children to possess a good record of academic performance

and a satisfying higher education, alongside the various neoliberal learning dispositions in order to ensure a successful life.

This research also produced ‘by-product’ findings. It made a meaningful attempt to experiment to integrate social media, specifically WeChat, in the research process. It purposefully used the three different layers of information from WeChat to construct a full picture of parents in question. WeChat group conversation is the first source of information. Parents were exchanging and communicating information and views of their children’s education, which provided a rich data base. The second source of information was the interviews I conducted with the eight active parents who to various extents represented the parents in the group. In the interview, I followed up the most frequently discussed topics and tried to get some insights into how those parents formed particular parenting views and opinions. WeChat posts circulated in the group supplemented parents’ conversations. It was the third source of information that both reflected and led parents’ views on parenting. By supplementing or sometimes contradicting each other, these three sets of information together demonstrated the complexities of the Chinese parenting practice in the group.

This study explored the way of using WeChat in the study of parents’ views and perspectives. Methodologically, WeChat became an important arena for parents to negotiate and construct their educational reality. Benefitting from the open space in social media like WeChat, the traditional educational authorities like (pre)schools had receded from being parents’ dominant sources of educational knowledge and information; rather, peer conversations and posts shared and circulated within social media largely provided an unfiltered, informal, and flexible channel for parents’ formation of educational knowledge. And this kind of information had become increasingly powerful in influencing parents’ decision making. Parents’ educational practices in WeChat constituted cooperation as well as resistance to state education at the same time. On the one hand, parents used social media to seek support for their children’s formal learning; on the other hand, they were using social media to find prescriptions to counter what they held as the disadvantages of state education (see Chapter 8 on Western education). Previous research has studied Chinese parents based in one locality, whether it be a famous inland city (Fong, 2004b; Kuan, 2015) or a little town (Kipnis, 2011a). This research established a virtual habitat in

social media as the research field for a parenting study. What bonded them together was a shared interest rather than a physical locality. The findings generated from the data justified the necessity and possibility of researchers' inclusion of social media for further parenting studies.

9.3 Reflection: The role of WeChat in the current research

While the research focused on parents, the platform where the research was conducted also deserves discussion. As argued in Chapter 4 on the methodology, the use of WeChat enabled me to connect with a broader group of participants who were located in a wide range of localities. It also facilitated the data collection and analysis process. Indeed, the use of WeChat was partly what made this piece of research unique.

WeChat shaped parents' educational aspirations. It provided information which parents could draw upon to inform their educational practice. From the previous chapter, it can be seen that the Little MBA WeChat parent group was where different educational ideas were exchanged. It offered a virtual space for parents' self-reflection and mutual learning. WeChat was not merely a media platform upon which to conduct the research activities. Rather, it also acted as a mechanism to produce new ideas. For example, by having a conversation on the arts learning in *ke wai ban*, parents learnt to pick up a unique instrument for their children (see section 6.3), so that their children could have an edge over others. Chapter 8 described how a form of Western education was formulated and distributed among the WeChat group to relieve parents' concerns. Parents' ideas were made possible by sharing, discussing, and commenting among each other in WeChat. In this group of parents, the social media platform constituted an important part in people's decision-making process and shaped their views on education.

WeChat complemented parents' education endeavours. It not only allowed for ideas to be (re)produced and (re)distributed as shown above but also enabled them to put their educational ideals into practice. It had the potential to disturb the existing social order and reinvigorate the education provisions through the networked information sharing, discussing, and learning. In Chapter 6, Luli could not afford the offline *ke wai ban* which was costly. Thanks to *weike*, an online educational service based on the WeChat platform, she

was able to access a flexible and affordable out-of-school educational service. It was a form of concerted cultivation that differed from the one adopted by parents in the study by Anette Lareau (2011). It was a good example of where accessible and affordable education services could reach the wider public with the help of WeChat, potentially breaking socioeconomic barriers. However, it should be noted that once the *weike* was no longer free or at least cheap, Luli had to quit. Future research can examine the role of social media in class formation in the education field. It will be useful to find out which aspects of social media empower people to challenge the social hierarchy and which aspects merely contribute to and reinforce class formation.

WeChat was a platform where parents were able to communicate their education related desires, depression, and anxieties. However, the platform also fired their desires and increased their anxieties. For example, by manufacturing a form of Western education to address their concerns for Chinese education, parents produced new anxieties, as the Western education services they desired all required substantial financial input. Social media like WeChat was a double-edged sword. During the process of addressing the anxiety in the WeChat group, parents would often generate more anxiety and concerns. The impact of social media on parents' educational choices, both positive and negative, deserves further interrogation on a wider scale.

People on social media, as in the WeChat parent group, were no longer the passive recipients of information. On this platform, parents were active contributors who were the producers, consumers, and distributors of educational information all at the same time. The influence these parents had was not similar to the traditional model where expert knowledge was commissioned by an authority and passed down to the recipients. However, in the WeChat platform, the boundary between knowledge producers and receivers had become increasingly blurred and complex. When encountering educational problems, parents were empowered to explore solutions among themselves. This was evidenced in section 7.5 where parents suggested that others initiate pre-study of the primary school materials in preschools in order to enhance their children's confidence.

To some extent, the WeChat group in my study served as an education management mechanism where parents expressed their concerns, sought justification, and gained legitimacy regarding their parenting practice. It gave parents an opportunity to become education experts with expertise that suited their own agenda. The networked community in WeChat had grouped the 'expert' parents and linked itself with the wider resources and expertise of EYE. During the process, WeChat not only reflected parents' desires and resolves to self-responsibilise, but also facilitated the transfer of educational responsibility from the official educational institutions to families.

9.4 Problematizing WeChat

Despite the benefits brought by the use of WeChat, it also raises challenges and questions. In this section, I aim to problematise WeChat and by doing so, to further examine the complexities of this research.

One advantage of the Internet and WeChat was the supposed openness. It was where the different ideas and practices were brought in, exchanged, and communicated. However, in Chapter 8, I also argued that parents would censor the contents on Western education and deliberately choose the message that spoke for their ideas. There was a general filtering mechanism in the WeChat group that applied to the selection of information.

Parents of the Little MBA group likely already held an assumption about the WeChat group before they joined, due to its name. The group name explicitly denoted a neoliberal orientation. Accordingly, parents of this group were 'like-minded' people and shared some common pursuits, valuing creativity and entrepreneurship in education ideas, and being '*rebellious and bold*' as one participant, Bi, said about them in the group. Also, the topics they brought for discussion, although always contested by parents' different opinions, were centred on the tensions between neoliberal values and academic pressure. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the homogeneity of the group and understand its common concerns and assumptions. A mother who wanted her children to be associated with the 'little MBA' would inevitably be a parent who upheld the values of entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovativeness in education. On the contrary, parents who wholeheartedly embraced exam-centred education and had no particular taste for children's creativity and

innovativeness would probably turn their backs on the group the moment they were informed of its name.

The WeChat community was relatively loosely constructed and members could come and go. People who decided to remain might be those parents whose assumptions were congruent with the group's overall aim. All though many parents left the group during the duration of the research, the parents who chose to stay were likely to have been those who mostly identified themselves with the group's common pursuit and assumptions.

Many parents claimed that the WeChat platform and group gave them a view different from the official discourse. However, the WeChat group was not free from outside influences but was bound by its own agenda. Parents' concerns for their children's interest cultivation and parents' cordial willingness to learn about Western education were both in line with the recent educational reform and promotion of the educational market. On the one hand, the knowledge produced in the group relieved parents' problems and concerns as the WeChat group in some way provided the prescriptions to deal with the educational problems; on the other hand, it strengthened parents' doubts and anxieties, as these prescriptions were costly and were not equally available to all parents. In other words, this group favoured certain types of knowledge. The parents were also expected to buy these services in the educational market to fulfil their responsibilities. Thus, their educational aspirations and orientations were mediated by their consumption of the favoured knowledge. This knowledge entailed an imperative for parents to engage in the educational market.

9.5 Review of the contexts: a timely look at Chinese parents in the 'new era'

The study examined a group of Chinese parents' views and aspirations towards their children's EYE through the social media platform WeChat. It fulfilled its aim of enhancing understanding of Chinese parents and their educational pursuits at a time when China is attempting to transit from the 'world factory' to a global innovation powerhouse (Gracie, 2017).

This study took place in a unique period for the country. Domestically, China has witnessed a dramatic growth in its wealth, but also suffered from the challenge of the widening socioeconomic gap, and environmental degradation. Since 2014, the current Chinese President Xi Jinping has made several judgements, statements, and directions on various occasions which have covered the complex social fabric of the Chinese society. In the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017, the *Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era* was officially proposed and written into the party's constitution. The span of this study fell under the formation of Xi's Thought in the 'new era' of China. The national ambitions, embodied by the 'Chinese dream' put forward by President Xi Jinping under his leadership, have gained popularity in Chinese society. During the research period, many aspects of Chinese society, including the economy, politics, education, and international relationship have been significantly re-shaped. During the past years, Chinese parents have gained access to increasingly disposable resources that can be invested in their children's education, compared with what my parents could do one or two decades ago (Fong, 2004). Globally, China's national strategy has gone from 'hiding capabilities and keeping a low profile' (*韬光养晦* in Chinese) in order to concentrate on the development of the economy in the 1980s and 1990s, to a more assertive and confident role in the global stage to relive its perceived past glories (Sørensen, 2015). In the meantime, however, it has to engage with the increasingly uncertain and complicated regional and global geopolitical landscape.

The upgrade of the economic structure, the rise of the Asia-Pacific region in the global geopolitical map, and the trade disputes with the US have all added to the importance for the country of a highly educated and well-trained population. Against this background, the views and perspectives of Chinese people towards their country, the national education system, and their roles in it have changed accordingly. This became obvious in Chapter 8, where parents exhibited mixed interpretations of Western education. It became a cherry-picking process where parents selectively chose certain aspects of Western education that could reflect their own aspirations, which were deeply rooted in Chinese traditions and the economic and political reality. A detailed analysis of the 'new era' is out of the scope of this

research, but this study can effectively add to an understanding of contemporary Chinese parents' perspectives and aspirations towards EYE in this 'new era'.

This study gave a timely look at how parents adjusted and performed their roles in their children's EYE and what were their views, perspectives, and aspirations towards education in this 'new era'. In doing so, the study fills a gap in the current research on Chinese parents and promotes a scholarly discussion on the role of parents in China's rapid economic, social, and technological change.

Throughout the course of my time in the WeChat group, I was presented with vastly broad-ranging, sometimes chaotic views, concerns, and discussions related to parents' views on their children's education. The rich information lies in their conversations in the group, in the interviews I conducted with them, and in the posts shared in the group. I got the chance to know these parents, from various walks of life and locations. Residing in this online parent community, I could delve into their daily activities in the social media space and understand them. I was also enabled to make sense of their confusion, joy, and sorrow in the process of parenting and educating their children in this 'new era'.

By threading together the themes of the findings, data, and discussions, I intend to provide a holistic picture of these parents' views, perspectives, and aspirations for their children's education, and of how these ideas have been formed. I examine whether or not the research questions have been successfully answered, and if so, how the inquiry process has been carried out and what implications can be drawn from the process.

9.6 Reflection on personal influence

Upon the final stage of the journey, looking back at the research process, I was curious not only about the outcome of the study but also the influence of the PhD research on my life experience in general. I think researchers' life experiences and their research, especially for a qualitative researcher, always have mutual influences on each other. While I am still waiting to see how the PhD research will influence my future, I think that the interrogation of my personal experience on the research can help both readers and myself understand how the research was designed and the data interpreted.

I spent my postgraduate study on EYE in five different European countries from 2012 to 2014. That journey brought me an experience filled with culture shock as much as cultural reflection. It was then that I began to think about the impacts of my cultural roots and how they had been influencing my judgements on the educational phenomenon. During the PhD study, the intercultural experiences informed me of the necessity of inspecting the influence of Confucianism on the Chinese parents' educational practices, and at the same time, the overseas experience compelled me to think how the parents' ideas were subject to influence from the West during China's modernisation process. It was the interaction and co-working of the local and Western educational values, which were often uneasily made to sit together in government-initiated education reform, that led me to realise the complexities of contemporary Chinese education. It made me sensitive to the nuances across the different geographical and socioeconomic contexts in the West. Thus, in Chapter 8, when parents talked about 'Western education', I tried to problematise their construction and bring together various aspects of it for consideration. For example, I considered how parents in the WeChat group neglected the influences of social class in their post on Western education (see section 8.2).

During the study in the European countries, I found that many of the practices and ideas advocated in China's educational reform, like the central role of play in children's development, were already being practiced in the countries I visited and were held as the norm there. They were deeply implicated in the local cultural beliefs. Therefore, to borrow those ideas and practices and then to apply them in a different cultural context like China would be difficult. The awareness of the cultural differences enabled me to understand the dilemma and ambivalences the parents were confronted with when they were learning about Western education. I came to develop a sensitivity towards the uneasy process of China's learning from the West.

Besides studying in these Western countries, I had been a teacher in China who interacted with parents as part of my daily working life. I also received my education, until postgraduate level, in China. The experience compelled me to link Chinese educational traditions with parents' educational aspirations, whether it be *mengxue* or *keju*, and how

the traditions could shadow people's decision-making processes. My Chinese and Western education and working experience together enabled me to become simultaneously an insider and outsider of Chinese EYE. When I was looking at the parents' claims, I made reference to my own encounters in the West and my experience as a teacher in China and these inevitably influenced the analysis and writing of the thesis.

9.7 Some limitations

WeChat only constituted part of the parents' life experiences. There had always been a multi-layered life that these parents and children would go through, where parents had to face multiple life challenges. These would range from parent-teacher meetings to children's clinic appointments. During these occasions, parents were required to give a prompt and spontaneous response to the more urgent problems. There were also undoubtedly some emotional moments in their educational and parenting practice, when all the rational discussion and conversations that frequently appeared in the WeChat group had to give way to both parents and children's immediate emotional responses. These dramatic moments in people's lives, however, fell out of the reach of this study. In the WeChat group, the other important education stakeholders for young children, such as neighbours, colleagues, teachers and, of course, children themselves, were nearly absent. Furthermore, parents' claims in the WeChat group were hard to verify. It was difficult to know whether and to what extent they upheld these claims in life.

As an attempt to study the educational phenomenon facilitated by social media, there is, unfortunately, a lack of participants' specific socioeconomic and demographic data. As I argued in Chapter 5, collecting their demographic data was difficult in such an informal, natural space as in WeChat. It carried the potential risk of intruding on parents' online lives and may have had a negative influence on their interactions. In WeChat, it was highly sensitive and suspicious to ask for personal details in the online environment. However, future research might achieve this by cooperating with some reliable, well-established online providers.

Further research can also combine substantial offline observation to complement the online data. Voices of different stakeholders, such as teachers, can also be brought in to compare

with parents and their views. This study showed that social media like WeChat provided equal access to educational information for parents of various backgrounds. Future researchers can examine the relationship between parents' socioeconomic status, their use of social media, and how the relationship influences their perspectives of education.

However, as I mentioned during the discussion on the posts on US and UK education in Chapter 8, what mattered the most for this study was not whether the truth was faithfully revealed or whether the authenticity and validity of the posts could be verified; rather, it was the parents' educational values and views behind the sharing and discussion that deserved more attention and analysis. In the end, even though I found the 'Western education' discussed in the WeChat group to only be a one-sided and partial representation of the context in the West, it was this biased information that disclosed parents' education aspirations. Likewise, whether the parents put their claims into practice, or whether the claims reflected what they really thought, or whether they stuck to what they thought, all came second to what they had stated about their views and aspirations regarding Chinese EYE.

The lack of other EYE stakeholders' direct involvement was also offset by their frequent appearances in parents' comments and shared posts. For example, teachers and schools were frequently mentioned by parents in the group. In Chapter 7, Meng assumed a dual role. She was both a mother and a high school staff member, and it was this dual identity that convinced her of the necessity of conducting structured education from a young age. The participation of the other EYE stakeholders was mainly mediated by parents in the WeChat group. In this sense, the re-voicing of other educational stakeholders reinforced the role of parents, who were the focus of this research.

Another limitation is that with WeChat being the primary source of data, it was not possible to present the critical moments of family life. It was mainly through parents' conversations in the WeChat group and the interviews with them that I was able to put together their lives. Adding real-life observation would add depth to exploring the research questions in future research.

The size and the changing dynamics of the online community also influenced what and how parents' views were produced. The size of the parents' group was in constant, though not radical, change. At some points during the research, it reached the maximum number of 500. At other times, it dropped to between 420 and 470. Nevertheless, it remained a large online community. As I argued in Chapter 4 on methodology, even though the platform allowed group members to discuss relevant topics, many of them were mainly lurking and not contributing directly. In practice, a certain group of people who were regular contributors dominated the space. As Johnston (2014) argues, the group size influences the dynamic of the social media group. For him, as the group grows larger, the discussion in the group tends to become a 'broadcast'. In my research, many of the parents were more comfortable being part of the 'audience', although they could still make substantial but anonymous contributions by clicking 'like', etc. (see the re-conceptualisation of participation in section 4.6). If this research were conducted in a different space, time, or with a different number of parents, the dynamics and interactions taking place in the group would be different.

9.8 Implications for policy, practice and further research

This research explored parents' perspectives, focusing on one group of parents in WeChat in the transitional time of China's 'new era'. Based on the findings presented above, there are the following implications.

9.8.1 Implications for further research

First, this research made an attempt to engage participants through social media. It pointed out a new direction of conducting parenting and EYE with the use of social media. Instead of the traditional research instruments of interviews and questionnaires on the study of parents' perspectives and views, this research provided an alternative approach to look at how their views were demonstrated via social media. With WeChat increasingly being built into Chinese people's daily lives, there is a need and possibility to systematically examine how EYE has been represented, negotiated, and constructed in the social media space by parents. Further research can widen the sample to look at different groups of parents as well as investigate other education-related questions. It is also interesting to explore how parents' online discussion influences their offline education practice, and to what extent their online claims could be translated into educational activities. Methodologically,

research in the future can cultivate the platform of WeChat. For example, WeChat could be a place for a focus group interview for various research studies. This research also presented an example of combining WeChat group conversations, interviews and WeChat posts in the data collection and data analysis process.

Moreover, this research highlighted the way of contemporary Chinese parents' engagement in EYE. It further highlighted the power of parents in achieving their aspirations of their children's EYE. With the widespread use of social media and increasing socioeconomic resources at their disposal, parents in China were actively remedying what they regarded as the problems in state education. This implicated a need to update the views on the parents-(pre)school relationship, and re-position parents in EYE. Furthermore, this research showed that parents' involvement in their children's education was no longer confined to the institutional context; rather, they could actively use technology to bring together the various sources of information, upon which they could base their choices to promote their children's EYE. Future research can study parents' decision-making mechanisms in the digital age and study how this affects the relationship between parents and educational institutions.

9.8.2 Implications for practice

This research showed that education institutions, be they state ones like (pre)schools or the ones in the educational market, need to listen to parents' voices and understand their views and aspirations. Parents' voices are important not only in that they are participants in their children's education and they are there to 'collaborate' and 'help out'; more importantly, parents in this new era for China can influence education by making choices in the educational market as demonstrated in Chapter 6 and Chapter 8. When parents become dissatisfied with the educational approaches of state education, educational practitioners can understand parents' aspirations and update their strategies to work with parents. Social media including WeChat has proven to be an important vehicle for parents and (pre)schools' cooperation. In remote areas or in other cases where it is not possible for (pre)school educators to regularly meet with parents, social media can bring them together, giving them channels to communicate, share, and exchange information.

This research provides a glimpse into the complexities of the formation of parents' views and perceptions. By demonstrating the tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions of parents' educational aspirations, and how parents make sense of and theorise their own parenting, practitioners can develop a better understanding of parents and achieve better cooperation and performance.

9.8.3 Implications for policy

Parents' perspectives and views should be listened to and honoured in the education policy-making process. Policymakers should address parents' needs and concerns in order to acquire their support. This research presented the possibility of learning about parents' views through social media. In the future, the government can incorporate social media as an important channel for understanding parents' perspectives. Such a research approach can help the government collect feedback on education policies. Policymakers can cultivate the channels of WeChat groups to understand the pursuits of the various education stakeholders in China. For example, by analysis of the posts that are popular among parents, policymakers can have a better understanding of parents' views and needs regarding education.

This research found that Chinese parents in this era are increasingly being held responsible for their children's education. However, with so many different options in the educational market, parents also need proper guidance and support from the authorities to make informed choices to achieve their educational goals. Parents' reliance on commercial educational services to realise their educational aspirations could potentially enlarge the socioeconomic gap. As seen in Chapter 6, many of the services used by parents as a remedy for the problems in state education required their economic input. It relieved educational anxiety for some parents while making others even more anxious, especially if they could not afford these services. This anxiety is likely to be spread by the use of social media like WeChat. In this sense, the government also has to be aware of and address the inequality brought by the use of social media.

9.9 The end and the beginning: the story continues

When I think about my own childhood and EYE experience, I am always grateful to the way my parents treated me. They provided me with love and the resources they could spare and

always put my education as a family priority, no matter how hard the situation was. Until the late 1990s, it was not uncommon for Chinese urban families, like mine, to have parents share a bed with their child in a cramped one-room bungalow which combined the functions of a living room, bedroom, reading room, and, at night, toilet. Under such a situation, I can still now remember the countless nights when my parents turned off the TV, gave up my mother's favourite TV dramas, and only whispered to each other so that I could concentrate on my endless homework and learning projects.

As a boy who was born in the late 1980s in a small town, a place bordering the Mongolian Steppe, remote from China's economic and political centre, I still witnessed the tremendous changes taking place during China's transitional period. During the early 1990s, a few years after my birth, a college graduate in China could still enjoy the privileges of being assigned a job in the state sector. A successful education, to a large extent, ensured a stable and respectable career. Soon, the human resources rationing system¹⁰ collapsed and degree inflation began. With the introduction of the market economy by the socialist regime, people's futures looked increasingly uncertain. Indeed, the feeling of a more prosperous future was accompanied by a sense of increasing personal insecurity and uncertainty, which developed throughout the 1990s and only intensified into the early decades of the 21st century.

For my parents, education was one of the cornerstones of their belief system. My childhood and growing up experience seemed to be filled with their aspirations for my future which had always been tied up with education. They used to tell me, as millions of parents probably told my generation's peers, that all my painstaking efforts to cram learning would pay off once I got into a famous university. It would be a final destination for education, in some sense a destination for the meaning of life as well. Like any religion that makes promises to its followers, my parents were like preachers who used to make me think that the post-*gaokao* days would mark a new stage for my life; that a place in a good university

¹⁰ Human resources rationing system was part of the Communist Party's national management strategy which assigned graduates from schools and colleges to the various job posts in the state sectors. With the gradual introduction of the market economy, the human resources rationing system was abolished in the 1990s.

would be like a place in heaven, where joy and contentment were guaranteed and would last for eternity.

I progressed from early years education to high school, went through *gaokao*, was successfully admitted into a famous university, and then was fortunate enough to get scholarships to continue my postgraduate studies in quite a few Western countries. At some moment during my PhD, I realised that *gaokao* had already passed long ago, yet the heaven I used to expect and work for was still to arrive. Even the ‘education preachers’ – my parents – were still concerned for me and my ‘post-doctorate’ career. Thus, it may not be such a surprise to realise that our almost-religious zeal for the prospects promised by *gaokao* and the education system as a whole nearly failed us. However, the belief in education was not relinquished by parents in the WeChat group.

For the children who were born in the 2000s, their growing up experience was accompanied by the taking-off of China’s economy, the gradual establishment of market economy logic, and the reinvigoration of the country’s political ambition and cultural confidence. Furthermore, technology had developed rapidly over the years. Twenty years ago, my naive, though sometimes beautiful, imagination of post-*gaokao* days and my belief in my parents’ enthusiastic preaching had partly arisen from the difficulty of accessing information. Today, parents can learn about education provisions by simply clicking on their mobile phone screens. After subscribing to a few accounts, educational information can beep and pop up every minute and send forever ‘new’ knowledge to the users. New ideas of the ‘best’ parenting practices are continuously forwarded through social media like WeChat on a daily basis, which is all but beyond the imagination of my parents when they practiced EYE on me in the 1980s and 1990s. Parents today no longer suffer from information deprivation; instead, it is the judgement and recognition of meaningful information that matter. Prosperity and prospects also mean more. Families today have to face widening socioeconomic gaps, environmental degradation, and increasing competition pre-, in- and after-school. Therefore, what do all these mean to parents? How do they see education now? Compared with my parents, what has changed and what has remained?

Two years after the data collection in the Little MBA group, when I was at the end of my PhD study, a 15-page long 'CV' of a five-year-old boy from Shanghai was reported in Chinese media and became an instant hit on the Internet. The 'CV' covered a variety of sections including 'unique personality', 'rich hobbies', and 'colourful experience' (BBC, 2018). This CV was said to be written in order to gain access to a competitive primary school. The report was shared in the Little MBA WeChat group and parents had a heated discussion about it. This report was out of the reach of my data collection period and so there seemed to be no need to mention it at all. However, it reminded me of how, two years after my data collection in the WeChat group, parents today are still navigating their aspirations for their children's achievements, and their concerns about the pressure overload in children's EYE. Despite the national imperatives to tackle the primary schoolisation of EYE (see section 2.2), parents still need to produce enough credentials in cultivating their children's development to partake in the fierce education competition in China. Personally, I am approaching the end of my PhD after a long journey. Professionally, as many more parents are still pushed to produce more biographies and 'CVs' for their children, my further enquiries on them are just beginning.

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Appendix A: Core interview questions

RQ1: What are parents' views about current EYE practice in China?

1. What courses do your child like most (least)? Why do you think it is the case?
2. What courses are your child most (least) good at? Why do you think it is the case?
3. What do you think of the teaching approaches? What are the benefits and disadvantages? Which aspects do you think is desirable? Which needs improvement?
4. What do you know about the EYE teaching approach in the West? Do you think they are applicable to China?
5. In what aspects does your own evaluation of your child's development and education comply with the official evaluation? In what aspects differ?

RQ2: What do parents' views reveal about their aspirations for their children's education?

1. What courses do your child like most (least)? Why do you think it is the case?
2. What courses are your child most (least) good at? Why do you think it is the case?
3. What courses do you think need to be adjusted? In what aspects?
4. If you have the chance to create a course for your child in (pre)school, what do you like to create?
5. What do you think of the teaching approaches? What are the benefits and disadvantages? Which aspects do you think is desirable? Which needs improvement?
6. What do you know about the EYE teaching approach in the West? Do you think they are applicable to China?

RQ3: What are their understandings of the role of parenting?

1. Do you think parents can influence the curriculum in (pre)schools? If you have the chance to create a course for your child in (pre)school, what do you like to create?
2. How do you engage in the courses? Do you think parents should/can play a role in any of the courses? How?
3. Do you think parents can influence teachers and teachers' pedagogic practice? If not, why? If so, how?
4. What roles do you think you have successfully taken? Can you give an example from the last week or two? What roles you have to work harder to achieve? Can you give examples from the last week or two?
5. In your context, can you give some examples from the last week or two where schooling is consistent and inconsistent with parenting?

Methodological Questions:

1. How useful is social media as a tool for gaining insights into parents' views of their children's education in China?
2. Why do you decide to join this particular WeChat group? What do you think of this group?
3. How does social media (WeChat) contribute to your understanding and practice of parenting?
4. In what aspects do you think this group is beneficial for you? In what aspects you find it unhelpful? Can you give examples from the past two weeks?
5. What other parents' groups have you joined? What is your opinion of the others?
6. What do you think of the role of emoji in people's communication in WeChat?

Appendix B: Research consent forms for interview participants

Information sheet 研究信息简介

I'm a PhD researcher from University of Edinburgh in the UK. Currently, I'm undertaking a research to explore Chinese parenting in early years context in China. The interview will help me develop deep and rounded understanding of Chinese parenting and will potentially contribute to research findings that is valuable to parents and other stakeholders of Chinese education.

我是英国爱丁堡大学的博士研究生，目前，我正在进行一个研究，探索中国早期教育中的家庭教育。研究的访谈部分，将会帮我建立起对中国家庭教育深刻和全面的理解。通过我的研究，我希望对中国家长和其他的中国教育参与者做出相应的贡献。

According to the research traditions and regulations in the UK, I'm obliged to seek consent from the research participants of my interview. By conducting the interview via voice call in WeChat, I will guarantee that your personal and private information, both online and offline, will be strictly protected and will not be disclosed to any third parties. Also, your online alias will be anonymized. All the information you provide will be used for academic purpose only. The audio interview will be recorded for the benefits of transcription and later reference but will be securely stored according to UK regulations.

根据英国的研究传统和规定，我需要向研究参与者取得同意。在运用微信进行采访的同时，我会严格的保护研究参与者的线上和线下的个人和隐私信息；相关信息不会泄露给第三方。而且，参与者的网名会被进一步匿名。所有采访中的信息，只将被用以学术用途。语音参访可能会被录音，以便研究者进行记录和参考。

You are entitled the right to ask for clarification and elaboration of the research where you are involved. Besides, your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any stage of the interview without any consequences.

您将有权询问研究的信息，并要求研究者对您参与的研究部分进行阐明。另外，您的参与将完全自愿，您有权在研究的任何阶段退出，而不必承担任何后果。

Please make sure you read the information above carefully. You will be asked to give oral consent at the beginning of the interview. This consent will be recorded.

请您阅读以上信息，您将在访谈开始被征询同意。

For any concerns, you are welcome to contact me or my supervisors.

如果有任何疑问，可以咨询我，和我在爱丁堡大学导师团队。

Key Contacts 联系人信息

The researcher myself: Xin Luo, 研究人：落鑫

Email: Xin.Luo@ed.ac.uk

Tel: +44(0) 7716 477041

Location (地址): Thomson's Land (Rm 1.09), Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh.

Webpage (网站): http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/about-us/people/researchstudents/profile.php?person_id=502;

The contact information of my supervisors in is as follows: 研究导师信息:

Professor Lydia Plowman (教授)

Email: lydia.plowman@ed.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0)131 651 6247

Location (地址): St John's Land (Rm 4.01), Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh.

Webpage (网站): www.ed.ac.uk/education/lydia-plowman

Dr Shari Sabeti (博士)

Email: shari.sabeti@ed.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0)131 651 6246

Location (地址): Charteris Land (Rm 4.08), Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh.

Webpage (网站): www.ed.ac.uk/education/shari-sabeti

Research Consent Form 研究同意书

Dear Sir or Madam, 亲爱的女士/先生,

This form seeks your consent for participation in my doctoral research project on parenting in early years education context in China. Please read the information sheet carefully and you can ask any questions concerning your participation in the research.

本表旨在寻求您参加本研究的同意, 该研究旨在探求中国早期教育中的家庭教育的角色。请您在填表前仔细阅读, 并在研究开始前告知研究者是否愿意参加该研究。

1. I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet 我已经阅读并了解该研究及其相关信息

2. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.

我在参加研究前被给予机会询问与该研究有关的问题

3. I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.

我自愿参加此项研究

4. I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.

我明白我可以在任何时间, 无理由的退出该研究, 并且退出研究不会引起任何惩罚, 也不会被问起退出的原因。

5. The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.

关于保密性的相关措施已经被解释清楚 (例如使用假名, 匿名等)

6. The use of the data in research, publications and archiving has been explained to me.

相关数据的研究出版和保存已经被解释清楚。

Are you now clear about the research and your rights in the participation of the research?

Do you now have any questions about participating in the research? Do you agree to participate in the interview?

您对这项研究和您在这个研究中的权利有疑问么? 您对参与这个访谈有任何问题么?

您同意参与这个访谈么?

Appendix C: Examples of The WeChat posts on America and British education

WeChat posts on American Education

Name and themes of the posts	Contents
Using a large amount of reading to replace	This post investigated how an American primary school had encouraged children to read instead of completing a large amount of homework, and how the practice had contributed to children's enhanced autonomy and development of various interests. The post

<p>homework: the key to school performance improvement and jianfu in an American school</p> <p>Reading Autonomy Cultivation of interest</p>	<p>said that the head teacher decided that pupils should not take home any homework; instead, he required the children to do at least 20 minutes' reading at home. The post argued that in the primary school stage, children's academic performance had nothing to do with homework, but was more related to home reading. It regarded reading as having the capacity to lead to improvement in maths, science, and interpersonal skills.</p> <p>The title of the post used the Chinese educational notion of jianfu, meaning reducing the burden, to associate with the American practice. It was a common way for the WeChat posts to use Chinese ideas to make sense of the Western educational practice.</p>
<p>The American time of my daughter and me</p> <p>Courtesy Happiness Social connection Understanding of self</p>	<p>The post described the writer's experience in an American public school and detailed how the school created a welcoming and ordered environment and how teachers there focused on positive feedback to children. The author praised the school's environment as a 'playground'. In the meantime, the author spoke highly of the school's cultivation of children's courtesy to others and emphasis on rules and orders. The mother claimed that since her daughter came to the US, she smiled more and became more outgoing. The daughter had become able to speak up for herself. She also developed rationality and was more self-affirmative.</p>
<p>Children need to take character tests first before they go abroad! The reform of the American secondary schools' admission exams</p> <p>Character building</p>	<p>This post described how some of the American private schools had begun to adopt a character test as part of the admissions procedure. It warned Chinese students and families who wanted to study in American secondary schools that they had to strengthen their children's character building to avoid failure of applications. It further discussed the adoption of character skills snapshot (CSS) and its eight scales in resilience, open-mindedness, responsibility, teamwork, social awareness, self-control, curiosity, and initiative. Finally, the post analysed how Harvard and Yale applied confidence, enthusiasm, leadership, a sense of humour, and caring in its education.</p>
<p>The American parents' committee election also 'pin die' but in a different way</p> <p>American parents' involvement</p>	<p>This post used a Chinese term, pin die, to compare and contrast the different forms of parental involvement in the US and China. Pin die literally means competing with fathers. In the Chinese context, it means to compete with one's socioeconomic resources and privileges, inherited from parents (the father especially). In this article, however, the American parents were said to contribute more with volunteer work, accompaniment, and encouragement, rather than merely using their financial and socioeconomic power. These American parents were taking part as volunteers in sports events at the weekend and were spending time reading and doing other activities with their children.</p>

How were the authors' children admitted into elite American educational institutions? Entrepreneurship Test-taking skills Elite universities and schools	This post detailed how a Chinese mother educated her two sons at distinguished educational institutions. The elder son went to MIT while the younger one read at Phillips Academy Andover, an outstanding private school. The article attributed their educational success to parent-child shared reading and Chinese test-taking skills which were a cultural heritage that helped children succeed in American schools' tests. Furthermore, she highlighted the importance of sharing and entrepreneurship cultivated in American schools.
American maths learning is always done with this chart: you can learn any abstract knowledge this way Learning methods	This post described how American schools were using 'anchor charts' to demonstrate knowledge, logic, and ways of thinking vividly and visually. It went further to explore how this approach could be used in other aspects of life.
The most efficient way to teach children to write reading reviews. Learning methods Writing skills	This post explained how some American schools were using RACE to help children write reading reviews. RACE meant Restate, Answer, Cite, and Explain.
With a new year's resolution, you are more likely to achieve your goal Learning and teaching methods Project management	The author of the post introduced the SMART method that was said to be adopted by many schools in the US. The SMART method was to help children set their goals and realise them. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-based.

Do famous American schools have a place for Chinese children?	The author challenged the idea that Chinese children in American care only about academic study and that parents neglect their socialisation. The author claimed that he had a nephew who was a typical Asian model student in the US. He was admitted to Harvard, MIT, and Stanford, three of the top universities in the US. However, he ended up quitting Stanford, his own choice of university, and started his own business. The post focused on how he had transformed from a shy and quiet Asian boy to an outgoing man. The post also accused some Asian parents of tending to neglect their children's social development. The author argued that education should help children socialise and develop their listening skills, interpersonal skills, and self-promotion skills. It denounced that some Chinese parents liked to impose their own way of thinking on their children.
Entrepreneurship Character building	
Obama can finally be a good father	The post described how President Obama took his responsibility as a father even though he was fully occupied with his public commitment when he was in office. It exemplified how Obama was fostering his daughters' independence and how he respected the girls' decisions, although he was one of the most powerful men in the world at the time. It claimed that now that he had stepped down from office, he was happy that he could spend more time with his daughters and pay more attention to their education.
Spending time together	

WeChat posts on British Education

Name and themes of the posts	Contents
The preschool that the British Prince George attends value this the most	This was an analysis of the educational values of Thomas's Battersea Preschool, the preschool which Prince George attended. In its analysis, the post claimed that British aristocratic education emphasised the cultivation of pupils' emotional quotient (EQ) more than academic performance. From a young age, children learnt to deal
Aristocratic education Character building	

	<p>with others, including people of different social classes, races, and values.</p> <p>It also mentioned the principles of Eton College, another prestigious educational institution. The post said that the British aristocratic education paid attention not only to academic learning, but more importantly, the acceptance of other people and respect for their differences. It mentioned that the typical British gentleman cultivated by Eton was not only willing to help others but was equipped with the abilities to solve problems.</p>
<p>The British aristocratic education booklet: guidelines on the new type of ‘fuyang’</p> <p>Aristocratic education</p> <p>Manners and etiquette learning</p> <p><i>Fuyang and qiongyang</i></p> <p>(Chinese notions of parenting)</p>	<p>The post again mentioned ‘aristocratic education’, an image of British education popular in China. It related aristocratic education to the British royal heritage, equating it with the education for the elite class of people. It also said that aristocratic education in the UK was a set of educational practices that helped to cultivate the future elite of society who would serve the public. It was not an education that aimed to retain the established social order as many people liked to label it.</p> <p>Interestingly, this article borrowed the idea of Chinese parenting strategies to understand British educational traditions. In China, there had been a dichotomy of parenting approaches between <i>fuyang</i> and <i>qiongyang</i>. <i>Fuyang</i> could be literally translated as ‘cultivation with abundance’, while <i>qiongyang</i> meant the opposite, translated as ‘cultivation with deprivation’. In the post, it was claimed that in British aristocratic education, the two opposing approaches could sit comfortably with each other, where parents adopted <i>fuyang</i> to cultivate their</p>

	<p>children's fertile minds and versatility, and <i>qiongyang</i> to build up a physical body and strong will.</p> <p>It also mentioned that the aristocratic education in Britain developed elegance through the cultivation of children's manners and inner values. Additionally, the article emphasised the importance of order and rules in British aristocratic education and specifically detailed the Duke of Edinburgh Award and how it contributed to children's overall development.</p>
<p>The principals of leadership development in British private schools</p> <p>Outdoor education Private education Character building</p>	<p>This post tried to demonstrate how private schools in the UK were trying to instil leadership skills in children. It highlighted the significance of outdoor education in cultivating children's confidence, self-management, cooperation, and leadership in British private schools. It also mentioned the Duke of Edinburgh Award.</p>
<p>The <i>ke wai ban</i> interests amount to 22; the British Chinese mom guiding the interest in this way</p> <p>Aristocratic education All-round development Private schooling</p>	<p>This post detailed how a Chinese mother in the UK fostered her two children's interests and cultivated their all-round development. She attributed the diversity of her children's interests to private schooling, which provided a range of options for children's interest development. It also argued against the prevalent equating of British aristocratic education with wealth and the higher social classes, arguing that what aristocratic education in the UK emphasised was morality and all-roundedness.</p>
<p>A real 'noble' child should be cultivated in this way: the reflections of a mom on</p>	<p>This post held the view that private schools in the UK were accessible not only to the aristocratic class as they were in the 18th – early 20th century but were increasingly</p>

<p>sending her child to a top British private school</p> <p>Aristocratic education</p> <p>Character building</p> <p><i>Fuyang</i></p> <p>Private schooling</p>	<p>accessible to middle-class professionals. It said that they valued independence, exemplified by the fact that children had to carry their own school bags and deal with many other issues that would otherwise have been handled by parents in China.</p> <p>The post also emphasised sports in private schooling. It mentioned how horse riding, skiing, and other outdoor activities were encouraged in the private schools her child attended. Specifically, it mentioned the World Challenge and the Duke of Edinburgh Award, two activities her child took part in to experience hardships to strengthen her will and help her to grow and develop. The author related this to Confucian teachings. She used a famous Chinese verse to summarise her points: ‘the road to the success of a man was so hard that he would be made exhausted and starving’ (Chinese original goes as 天将降大人于斯人也，必先劳其筋骨，饿其体肤). It also discussed the meaning of <i>fuyang</i>, or cultivation with affluence, arguing that not only academic study, but also character building, careers skills training, arts, citizenship, innovativeness, and independence, were part of the British <i>fuyang</i>, or cultivation with affluence.</p>
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Appendix D: Publication and presentations related to this thesis

Peer reviewed publication

Xin Luo.2017.The Role of Social Media in Early Years Learning and Parenting – an Ethnography Study in China. An Leabh Óg- The OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies. pp. 99-105. <http://www.omepireland.ie/publications.html>

Invited conference presentations

Xin Luo. 2017. Exploring parenting on WeChat: an inter-sited ethnography in social media. European Conference on Educational Research, ECER 2017, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Xin Luo. 2016. Parents’ voices on WeChat: exploring Chinese parenting in early years’ context in China. Early Childhood Education & Care 2016 Conference. Valleta, Malta

Xin Luo. 2016. Chinese parenting in early years’ context in China: a study on WeChat. CERA-UK (Chinese Education Research Association-UK) Annual Conference.2016. IOE, UCL. London, UK.

Xin Luo. 2015. Modernization of education on WeChat: a virtual ethnography study of Chinese early childhood education. Interweaving Conference 2015. Edinburgh, UK.

The Role of Social Media in Early Years Learning and Parenting----- an Ethnography Study in China

Xin Luo

Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh

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Key words

Chinese parenting, ethnography, social media

Introduction

Chinese parenting has experienced dramatic changes during the past decades. Parenting beliefs, practices and theories have undergone dramatic shifts due to the unprecedented socioeconomic changes that have taken place in Chinese society (Kuan, 2015). These changes have occurred within the context of an emerging market economy, increasing globalisation, westernisation as well as socialism and Confucian traditions (Fong, 2004). As a result, parents' ideas on what is good parenting and education, and how "good" parenting can contribute to "good" education vary. During recent years, with increasing number of smartphone users and the rise of social media, parenting has frequently appeared as a popular topic in social media in China, where parents can openly criticise and confront the institution of official education, despite the control of the Internet censorship system imposed by Chinese government.

This paper is part of a doctoral research study of Chinese parenting practice, within the use of social media in early years education contexts. Rather than discuss parenting practice, this paper will focus on the methodological implications of the project. It intends to explore how social media can be used as a tool to gain insights into parenting and education research. Specifically, it intends to explore how social media is used by Chinese parents as a tool to facilitate children's learning and fulfil parents' socially constructed expectations for their children's education.

The parents in the study are smartphone users of a popular Chinese social media app called "WeChat". Designed for smartphone holders, WeChat is the premier social media app in

China, which combines messaging, video and voice calling, posting, sharing, grouping and other typical social media functions. Some people even regard it as a combination of functions of “WhatsApp”, “Facebook” and “Twitter”. The parents in my study voluntarily joined a parental group in WeChat with a common interest of pursuing better early years education, addressing concerns about the official education system and sharing information, opinions and practice of EYE.

Social media, as the primary space where the informants lived their lives and where I collected data, is understood as the informants’ natural habitat (Parker Webster & Marques Da Silva, 2013). People create and communicate meanings there and can easily switch between the online and offline worlds, crossing the blurred border. The on-line space is built in people’s offline world while their offline life is reflected online. That is to say, the two worlds are not parallel, but intertwined. In this study, informants’ online discussion are closely associated with their experience of education offline. Their opinions, attitudes and emotions towards education developed offline are also communicated and shared online. Moreover, people’s online activities in social media may lead to change of their opinions, attitudes, emotions and even practices in the offline space, which are then brought back for further discussion online. The relationship between informants’ online and offline space operates as a loop, which offers a window to understand what parenting and education means in their life. In the meantime, the unequal distribution of wealth and information, which constrains the learning of particular groups of people offline, also poses challenge to further the achievement gap between families of different resources.

In this study, social media is the site, the basis of informants’ existence and the mode of communication that mediates the interaction of the community (Howard & Jones, 2004). It is a site in a sense that informants, from various walks of life, are located and that space within which they live their lives and interactions with each other. Traditionally, interaction in a research site is bounded by space and time. That is to say, informants’ activities take place within a limited time with clearly marked boundaries. However, social media that accommodates this study, revolutionises and forwards the notion of a research site (Hine, 2000; Parker Webster & Marques Da Silva, 2013). Through social media, people are enabled to cross the temporal and space barriers of traditional sites (Kendall, 2009). Indeed, social media provides the material basis for the existence of informants online, just as the Earth does for them offline.

In the following part of the paper, I will address the methodology of this research and briefly report some initial insights from the findings.

Methods and methodology

I employed ethnography to get thick data, go deep and think wide (Walford, 2008). Ethnography allowed me to creatively explore Chinese parenting in its rarely tapped territory, social media. A parents’ group in WeChat that comprised of around 500 members was selected as the primary site for my research. The group members were mainly parents whose children aged between four and eight. As a member of the group, I immersed myself for eight months and disclosed myself as a researcher. I watched their monologue, conversation and sometimes argument. I read the posts they shared. And I tried to understand their concerns

about education. All this information, together with my field notes, was treated as my primary data. With the initial analysis of the data, I selected eight parents and conducted semi-structured interviews with them, using the voice call function built in WeChat. The interviews were transcribed and, together with WeChat group data, were analysed.

By participating in the parent group's online activity and interacting with them, I tried to get the insider's view from the parents about how they perceive current Chinese early years education and parenting; in the meantime, I kept a field note journal with which I frequently kept an outsider stance and reflected my role in the research.

Instead of calling it "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000), "multi-sited ethnography" (Hine, 2007) or "netnography" (Kozinets, 2009), I define this study as an intra-sited ethnography as research in the two different sites, WeChat group and voice call interview, are both built in to the app of WeChat.

In this study, I redefined some key ideas of traditional ethnography and tried to accommodate them into the context of WeChat. For example, "being there" in social media can be "lurking", i.e. a member can be there "invisibly" without intruding into other members' lives; participating in a social media group can be simply joining and following, without making any tangible contributions, as the number of group participants itself has already (re)produced meanings; and observation needs more "ethnographic imagination" (Brewer, 2000) to connect people's online activities with offline life.

For ethical purposes, I have fully disclosed myself as a researcher and have obtained consent from those informants who I followed and interviewed.

Findings and discussion

There are three main findings of the study.

Firstly social media proves to be multi-functional in providing complete pictures of informants in educational ethnography. It advances the definition of "research site" and brings people together without time and space barriers. As a powerful tool in the data collection process, social media allows researchers to track informants' activity histories that take place in different time slots within one window. People in WeChat sometimes even share their family holiday, daily leisure activities and career life to either get feedback from others or simply express themselves.

Moreover, social media creates new social relationships, blurring the boundary between private and public life. The WeChat parent group is a strangers' community; however, some people feel safer and more comfortable, probably due to the use of alias and long physical distance, to talk about their children's education. These all enable the researchers to have a thick description of informants' life contexts. As in the offline world, people in WeChat will also build up webs of social relationships. Similar to offline worlds, people will have conflicts, disagreements and emotions to express. Social media such as WeChat mediates people's interactions and affords them the opportunity to express themselves. For example, emoji in this study proved to be powerful in allowing the users to express their feelings, harmonise relationships, and in avoiding potential conflicts.

Thirdly, it is worth noting, however, that social media is increasingly under the surveillance and influence of neoliberalism in education in China. Some of the education resources in WeChat began with free access and soon turned to fee-payable once they had established a reputation. Depending on the content, audience, and the course lectures, some of the materials and information in WeChat can be quite expensive for some of the families. Thus, if not regulated, social media can further enlarge the education gap between classes.

I will use “*weike*”, or WeChat class, as an example to illustrate the points I made above. Designed as a form of online learning mediated by WeChat, *weike* is a product of cooperation between social media and educators where educational content is delivered by the different functions in WeChat. The educational content of *weike* can be innovative and flexible, compared with the traditional, offline classes. *Weike* has been increasingly popular among parents in the WeChat group, some of which were free to attend at the beginning and became fee-payable when they had accumulated enough audience and established reputation. For many parents, *weike* is innovative in both its form and contents. Regardless of where the parents are based, they can always receive *weike* as long as they are connected with the internet. In my virtual observation, I have noticed,

In *weike*, parents were enabled to talk to other parents who were based in America and whose daughter had high achievement; or the parents could talk to an expert in child development psychology. Parents were encouraged to prepare questions they wanted to ask before certain *weike* session began. During the *weike*, regardless of parents’ geographical locations, they could always overcome the physical barriers and arrive at the common virtual space. (Field notes: 02/04/2016)

The popularity of *weike* to some extent reflects the capacity of social media to deliver key information to a large, highly dispersed audience. Built in a social media, *weike* differentiates itself from other online learning resources such as “MOOCs” in that the educational functions are built in a platform whose primary focus is on socialising. To some extent, *weike* informalises learning by combining learning with socialising. However, unlike day-to-day communications, during *weike*, parents can always be connected with more knowledgeable others.

Some of the courses are designed specifically for children, under the guidance and supervision of adults. Luli was a mother I followed in my research. She occasionally signed up *weike* in WeChat for her daughter. During the interview, she once talked about a *weike* session about currencies and both she and her daughter seemed to like it;

I used to send my daughter to the *weike* about currencies. The scenario was that if you were the leader of a country, how were you going to design your own currency? She once attended some free classes like this (Interview with Luli: 10/07/2016)

“Currencies” in the weike Luli spoke of were designed creatively as a project exploration that is not unfamiliar in the western education context. For many children and parents in China, this approach can be viewed as something untraditional and innovative. Children in this kind of weike are given enough freedom, autonomy and trust, facilitated and monitored by parents, to explore a topic in question.

Besides this, weike offers a flexible source of education materials. Children and parents can join in the activities according to their schedule and the education venue is not fixed in one single physical locality. For those people who have missed the live stream contents, there are textual, audio and sometimes even video forms of summarisation that people can refer back to. For the lecturers who give instruction and guidance to students, some of them can even build up private contacts with parents. In this way, they are likely to have further communication outside of the weike sessions. The private relationship can sustain in WeChat and people can get some professional but private guidance.

Embedded in social media, weike has been held by some to have the capacity to address education inequalities as it “open these high quality educational contents to people who do not have the access easily” (from the interview with Luli). However, there are also limitations of weike and social media in general that are worth noticing. For example, the use of social media in education can create new inequality if it is left unregulated.

In fact, economic constraints proved to be a barrier for parents like Luli to continue exploring the different choices.

[I]n a small place like Shandong, where the purchase power is quite weak, four projects there (weike) cost almost four thousand RMB (about 470£) , which is way too much. Nevertheless, the children seem to like the assignment of the weike. I believe that the economic factors can pretty much determine the choice for the lessons (parents sign up for their children in weike).

Under the influence of neoliberalism, commercial and market-oriented components have increasingly been evident in education services in China, especially in early years contexts. Therefore, I argue that relevant research has to be done to study how commercialisation affects education through social media; accordingly government regulations have to be set up to prevent high quality education services being hijacked by commercialisation.

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